DARKVENGEANCE

THE NOVEL

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WARHAMMER
40,000
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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

COMPANY MASTER BALTHASAR, DARK ANGELS FIFTH COMPANY

The forest comes alive not with a roar but a whisper.

At first we think it is the wind whipping between the trees, the gentle rustle of the long grass swaying giving credence to that assumption, and it is only when Brother Orion is pulled violently to the ground that we realise something is amiss. His battle-brothers in Squad Raphael converge instantly on his position, weapons trained on unseen ambushers. We have made planetfall on Bane's Landing in pursuit of Kranon the Relentless and his Crimson Slaughter, and past experience tells us that ambush is one of their preferred tactics.

It is only when I notice the thick vine choking the life out of the stricken Space Marine that I realise this is no Crimson Slaughter trap.

I draw my power sword and, activating it on the downstroke, plough the blade through the liana, gouts of light green sap coating Orion's darker green power armour. He springs to his feet, scratches and cracks in the aquila adorning his chest thanks to the vicious barbs and hooks covering the outer surface on the now inert vine. More and more of the hostile plant life snakes into the small clearing we find ourselves in and weapons train in myriad directions as a dozen Dark Angels attempt to track multiple hostile targets.

Simiel is the next to fall and as the tactical squad turn to open fire on the creeper that has him in its grasp, Selaphiel and Heskia are lifted bodily from the ground by the unnatural flora, the latter dropping his plasma cannon as he is thrust upwards without warning. The clatter of bolter fire disturbs the silence of the forest and chunks of green flesh splatter haphazardly against tree trunks and splash to the ground. I aim

my plasma pistol at the vine gripping Selaphiel but before I can shoot, another creeper surges forth from between my feet and wraps itself around my wrist while another bursts out of the treeline above, lashing my lower legs and dumping me unceremoniously onto the ground.

With my off hand, I swing the power sword and free my wrist enabling me to fire directly upwards and scald the creeper that attacked from above with molten plasma. Two more vines attempt to entangle me but I parry them with my blade before finishing them off with my pistol. I have come too far, pursued the Crimson Slaughter across too many worlds, to allow anything to stop me now, just as they are within my grasp. Master Zadakiel will be avenged this day and this mission we have prosecuted for so many months will be at an end when I have claimed the head of Kranon the Relentless.

To my left, Sergeant Raphael has his chainsword drawn and is hacking away at a thick creeper that has attached itself to Brother Angelus. Angelus himself is beating away at the vine with the butt of his bolter, the grasping nature of the attacker its best defence as its victims cannot fire at it for fear of hitting themselves. The sergeant's chainsword snags as it meets the thickest part of the liana but, just as another creeper moves in to constrict him, unnatural green flame bursts forth and incinerates it. The smell of charred vegetation hangs heavy in the air. Another funnel of flame engulfs the vine holding Angelus and as it shrivels and blackens under the intense heat, the Space Marine drops to the ground and instantly opens up with his bolter at a vine about to catch his saviour, Librarian Turmiel.

The blue-armoured figure moves among his battle-brothers with a languid confidence, as if the battle going on around him is of no concern. He flicks his wrist and a cluster of vines just invading the edge of the clearing go up in a bonfire of emerald flame. Heskia, with his now retrieved plasma cannon powering up, is once again gripped by one of the deadly vines, but before the insidious creeper can dig in with its barbs, Turmiel turns it to charcoal with a particularly intense burst of psy-flame.

In turn, Heskia unleashes the fury of his plasma cannon and sprays the undergrowth with liquid heat, combusting trees on contact and rendering the vine into broiled slush. Burning creepers thrash and buck, igniting others as they come into contact. Those attempting to assault us from above become targets for the rest of the tactical squad and while Turmiel,

Heskia and myself burn off the vines at ground level, those snaking through the branches above are shredded by hard bolter rounds.

Within minutes, all of the vines are vanquished and, except for the gentle crackle of smouldering trees and pall of grey smoke billowing into the alien sky, things in the forest are as they were before the attack. Around me, Dark Angels remove their helmets and pieces of armour, assessing the damage and removing any hooks and barbs that had been sharp enough to penetrate ceramite. Weapons are checked, cleaned and reloaded but all the while they remain alert lest more of the animated vines should appear. Satisfied that all is well with the Space Marines under his command, Sergeant Raphael approaches me.

'Do you think that was left for us by the Crimson Slaughter, Master?' Green chlorophyllic ooze still slicks the sergeant's shaved head and blood trickles down his cheek from where a barb pierced the flesh just beneath his right eye.

'Doubtful. In all of the months we've been pursuing them, Kranon and his vile ilk have been loath to employ magick. I think this is just some quirk of evolution, genetic progression run rampant on a world long abandoned by mankind.'

Of the countless worlds that make up the Imperium of Mankind, only a fraction are inhabited – or indeed inhabitable – and of those that can sustain life, many of them play host to hostile life forms. In some extreme instances entire worlds, known as death worlds, are home to killer fauna and while many of these are left unpopulated, sometimes out of necessity humanity settles there. Even ancient Caliban, our Chapter's long-dead world of origin, was a forbidding place thanks to the deadly plant life and even deadlier beasts that dwelled in the forests there.

'One thing is certain, if the enemy didn't already know we were here...' I look around at the burning trees and grass, smoke pluming into the air like the signals the tribes on my home world use to communicate. 'They do now.'

INTERROGATOR-CHAPLAIN SERAPHICUS

Blood pools at the feet of the heretic, the sum of precisely four hundred and thirty-seven incisions made according to the tenets laid down in the *Book of Caliban*. The prisoner moans, punctuating the bass rumble of the *Sword of Caliban*'s engines, before babbling incoherently, an insane stream of consciousness that flits crazily between Low and High Gothic and several other dark tongues I do not understand.

Returning to the table at the back of the interrogation chamber, I exchange the tri-bladed incisor for a set of rusty forceps. I glance at my crozius arcanum and the three black pearls adorning it and wish that the prisoner I am interrogating would add me a fourth, but alas, the quest to right the wrongs of ancient history will have to wait.

'I will have the truth of it. Now.' I present the corroded instrument of torture and the traitor looks at it with his remaining eye before gurgling a defiant laugh.

'I will ask you again, what business have the Crimson Slaughter on the planet below? What vile artefact is it that you seek?'

This time, the prisoner offers an answer, though I am not certain it is in response to my questioning. 'He will learn. We will make him learn, him and his brothers. They will all learn.' He laughs again and, stripped of his corrupted power armour, more blood trickles to the ground from rents in his black carapace.

I cross the room in seconds, seizing his throat in my gauntleted hand.

'That's why I'm here, traitor, to learn. For you to teach me about what it is you seek and why you seek it. And if you will not teach me

willingly–’ With my free hand, I thrust the forceps into a large gash on the prisoner’s shoulder, ‘–then I will learn by brute force.’

He screams as I work the forceps but I can still hear the damage being done to his body. He spits in defiance; the acidic glob hits my shoulder pad where it begins to eat away at the black ceramite, but I pay it no heed. ‘Once more. What is it that Kranon seeks on the world below?’

The forceps strain but the traitor before me does not cry out this time, instead gritting his teeth. He regards me with his lone eye.

‘The Hellfire Stone. He seeks the Hellfire Stone. But you already knew that, didn’t you, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus? You and your “brothers”.’ He laughs wetly again before his head slumps forwards, his augmented physiology shutting down his body in order for it to recover from the numerous wounds. Already the bleeding from the widened gouge on his shoulder has been stemmed and the claret pool beneath his feet has ceased expansion.

I briefly consider removing the forceps but opt to leave them in place, knowing the value of an open wound during the next phase of interrogation. Two robed Chapter serfs enter the chamber and I motion to them to prepare more implements before returning to my chamber to inform Master Balthasar that our prey may know more about us than we do about them.

KESTALEV CHYRE, CRIMSON SLAUGHTER PRISONER

‘You’re dying. You’re dying and our laughter will torment you for all eternity.’

You can mock me now but soon I will be rid of your incessant taunts and jibes. We will all be rid of you.

‘You will be rid of nothing. The ritual will not cleanse you of your sins. It will not absolve you of the misdeeds of your past. It is a trick, poetic justice for the trick played on us when you came to our world and slaughtered us like cattle. Khor’en chose not to answer our prayers that day but he granted us our revenge in a different form – an eternity spent haunting you and your brother traitors. Not that you *will be haunted by us for much longer, Kestalev Chyre. This Dark Angel is going to kill you, kill you slowly while we feast upon your pain and then, when you are finally dead and no longer the Chaplain’s plaything, we will suck the marrow from your bones and tear your soul apart.’*

I know I will be dead soon, I’ve known that ever since I allowed the Dark Angels to capture me. But I’m not dead yet and I still have a part to play in my master’s plan.

SERGEANT ARION, RAVENWING

The engine screams in protest as the bike hits the base of the steep incline. Dropping down through the gears, my battle-brothers and I reach the top of the ridge and I signal a halt so we can get our bearings and assess the landscape from our new vantage point.

I remove the mag-locked auspex from my belt and begin to scan the immediate area for life forms. The unit pings intermittently and I adjust the settings to filter out the small fauna native to this world.

Behind me, Brother Arias is performing a visual assessment of the locale with his magnoculars while Brother Gethel has dismounted his bike and is patrolling our perimeter in case the enemy is invoking dark magicks that shield them from our instruments. They both do this as if by rote, belying the fact that we have only been operating as a unit for a few short months. I have served my Chapter for more than a century and in all that time I have commanded very few Space Marines with the dedication and fervour of Arias and Gethel.

My first taste of command came twenty-three years into my service to the Chapter. Since my elevation from the Scout Company I had served under Sergeant Lammas in Fourth Company's Third Squad and in all that time we had remained intact, a charmed existence in a universe where war is everything.

Until Mormathathrax.

The greenskin warlord, Mashskull the Unsane, had unleashed his forces on the Dark Angels recruitment world and the Chapter Master had received a distress call from our outpost there requesting reinforcements to stem the green tide. With the rest of the Chapter engaged on other

battlefronts, the call came to the *Vinco Redemptor* to divert from its reinforcement mission and take Fourth Company to Mormathathrax to bolster the skeleton force there.

But we were too late.

Delays in the warp cost us dearly and it was three Terran years before we would arrive in-system. Imperial Guard forces had barely held on in that time but Chaplain Phaldor and his honour guard had been wiped out by the warlord himself, and the ork tyrant had taken to wearing the Chaplain's shoulder pads and carrying his crozius arcanum into battle. Stricken by this affront to the Chapter's honour, Company Master Fraciel ordered the entire company onto Mormathathrax to hunt down and kill Mashskull. The hunt was swift and bloody but for every Dark Angel lost at the hand of the vile xenos, a thousand orks were slain.

The tyrant was finally cornered in a citadel in the planetary capital and the Chapter Master duelled with the massive brute while the remainder of the company held the rest of the greenskin horde at bay. For a day and a night, Fraciel fought the monstrosity until finally, at dawn's first light, the Chapter Master claimed the alien's scalp. But despite the Chapter's honour being restored, the cost to the company was huge. Of the hundred Dark Angels who made planetfall, only twenty-seven made it back to the *Vinco Redemptor* and many squads had been wiped out entirely.

Third Squad's charmed existence had lasted right until the final hour of the battle but, at the very last, the orks concentrated their numbers on the smaller side gate to the citadel we had been defending, and gradually our numbers had been whittled down until only Sergeant Lammas and I remained standing, shoulder to shoulder.

With the corpses of the fallen damming the approach to the gate, one of the tyrant's lieutenants broke through and engaged us both in hand-to-hand combat. Though we fought valiantly, the sergeant's spine was crushed over the ork's knee and, when I was finally able to land the killing blow with Lammas's chainsword, in its death throes the xenos hulk almost crushed the life from me.

Almost.

When the Apothecaries found me, my sus-an membrane had kicked in and my recovery had already begun. It would be three weeks before I regained consciousness and another month before I was considered battle-ready, but by that time Fourth Company had started rebuilding

and, in recognition of the part I played in the Mormathathrax campaign, I was promoted to sergeant of the newly bolstered Third Squad.

Despite the relative inexperience of the new influx to Third Squad, we regained our charmed existence. The nine Scouts presented to me on board the *Vinco Redemptor* barely two months after the slaying of Mashskull would all fight alongside me for the next three decades and grow into fine examples of Dark Angels.

Until the *Harbinger of Woe*.

A routine patrol of the outer reaches of the Merro subsector picked up a vessel translating into real space on their long-range auspexes. The Dark Angels strike cruiser *Salvation* was sent to investigate and as it got closer to the newly warp-emerged craft, two things became apparent: not only was the vessel enormous – a space hulk – but it was showing massive signs of life.

Too vast for the *Salvation*'s weapons arrays to do more than scratch the hull, the only way to deal with it before it reached the inhabited worlds of Merro was to board the craft and eliminate whatever was on board. With the Dark Angels legendary First Company, the Deathwing, fighting on the other side of the Imperium and no other Space Marine Chapters within range to intercept the hulk quickly, Fraciel made the bold decision to teleport Fourth Company aboard the craft, by now identified as the *Harbinger of Woe*.

Of all the known life forms in the Imperium, none are as insidious as the tyranids. Relentless in their advance through the worlds of mankind, the tyranids are a contradiction given form, continually destroying to create. Entire worlds and planetary systems are left as barren husks in their wake, the raw DNA and lifestuff consumed so that the hive mind can transform and reappropriate it to create new bioforms, more efficient killing machines that can begin anew the cycle of death and life. Such is their fearsome reputation among the Adeptus Astartes that even the most long-lived veteran would think long and hard before engaging this particular xenos in battle, many bearing the scars from previous encounters.

When we teleported aboard the *Harbinger of Woe* that day, each and every Dark Angel was fully prepared to face the tyranids but not a single one of them hoped that would be the case once we rematerialised on board the hulk.

It was three seconds before the first Dark Angels fatality.

The teleportation had been surprisingly accurate and the entire company had been deposited in the same chamber of the craft. Unfortunately, that meant the tyranids had us all in one place and could pick us off one by one. The Devastators were the first to fall and within a minute of teleporting aboard not a single Space Marine armed with a heavy weapon was left alive. Within five minutes, every Dark Angel carrying a flamer had fallen to the chittering hordes and before the first ten minutes of the battle were through, Fraciel and I were the only two ranking Dark Angels left standing. Many Imperial scholars and those within the Magos Biologis will tell you that the tyranids are an unthinking race, a life form that operates purely on impulse, but on the basis of my many encounters with the vile xenos I know the opposite to be true. Although an individual tyranid is a simple opponent, acting only on its most basic instincts, the hive mind is a truly fearsome proposition and one that is more than capable of matching wits with even the finest the Adeptus Astartes has to offer. As we were finding, to our peril.

Those of us left standing were already bearing the marks of our encounter – a puckered scar runs along the length of my thigh as a souvenir of that day – and the tyranids were beginning to pen us in. Pushed back against the bulkhead, Fraciel was barking orders, attempting to regroup the survivors and begin a counter-attack. Laying down covering fire with my bolter, I crossed the distance between us and took up position alongside him.

‘Arion, we’re going to hold them here. Take these.’ He reached down to his thigh and removed a webslung pack with his left hand. It was only then that I noticed that he’d lost the other to the tyranids; such was the tenacity and prowess of the man that the loss of a hand had not affected his ability to fight in the slightest.

‘Melta bombs. If the teleportation calculations were correct then the realspace engines are two chambers back. Our only chance is to blow them and take out the rest of the hulk in the chain reaction. Plant these and then teleport out. We’ll buy you enough time to get the job done.’

Fraciel was a taciturn and straightforward character and in all the years I served under him, those final words were the most he had ever spoken to me.

I nodded and, picking up a fallen heavy flamer, began to burn my way through the seething mass, the bright orange flames lighting my way through the darkness. Bodies, both Space Marine and tyranid, littered the

floor and progress was slow as I incinerated my way through to the next chamber. All attention focused on my surviving battle-brothers, the tyranids had left the next room unguarded and within minutes I was in the engine house planting timed charges.

In my entire time as a Dark Angel I have only ever once disobeyed a direct order from a Company Master. This was that one occasion.

As expected, when I returned to the chamber into which we had teleported, Fraciel and the few surviving Dark Angels had formed a circle in the centre and were in danger of being overwhelmed. I ignited the flamer and before me tyranids unleashed death howls as their chitinous hides caught fire and their flesh began to pucker and boil. Another Dark Angel beside Fraciel succumbed to the xenos assault, leaving only four of us against what felt like a whole hive fleet. More of the xenos withered under my flamer's attention and a path towards Fraciel's position opened up.

Another of the battle-brothers alongside the Company Master fell.

The rampant tyranids now began to divert their attention and more and more of them converged on me. The hive mind had been tactically astute taking out the heavy flamers during the initial stages of the attack, as every time I depressed the ignition stud, two or three of the alien beasts were engulfed in an inferno.

The last Dark Angel beside Fraciel died, decapitated by a hormagaunt's claw.

Dozens more tyranids roasted, those already engulfed thrashing about mindlessly and setting light to others. Crazed shadows flickered on the walls of the chamber and a great collective wail went up from the dying horde.

Fraciel was almost within reach when the lictor's claw impaled him.

The Company Master slumped to his knees, his one remaining hand losing grip of his bolt pistol. Within seconds the horde was upon him. I began to scream in defiance but my plaintive wail was drowned out by the sound of the melta bombs detonating, heralding the destruction of the *Harbinger of Woe*.

Six weeks later I woke up in the apothecarion on board *Salvation*.

In spite of the wounds I suffered in the explosion, I once more had my sus-an membrane to thank for saving my life. Mere hours after the destruction of the hulk, *Salvation* picked up the automated distress beacon in my power armour and my unconscious form was brought

aboard. This time, I wasn't just the sole survivor of my squad – I was the sole survivor of my entire company, though I garnered some comfort from the fact that they had all died fighting on board the *Harbinger of Woe* rather than in the explosion.

Towards the end of my recuperation, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus came to see me in the apothecarion. I fully expected him to tell me that a new Third Squad had been selected for me from among the ranks of the Scouts and were waiting for me to lead them into glorious battle. That wasn't to be the case.

'A place has opened up in the Ravenwing and we have need of an experienced sergeant. What say you, Arion? Will you don the black and spiral yet further towards the inner circle?'

'I'm surprised you even asked. It would be a great honour to take my place in the esteemed Second Company.'

The Chaplain smiled and nodded his approval before taking his leave. He stopped on the threshold of the apothecarion and turned back to me.

'This is the second time you've been the sole survivor of your squad, isn't it, sergeant?'

'It is, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus. I cannot explain it and I am too much of a realist to put it down to something as random and intangible as mere luck.'

'Perhaps the Lion and the Emperor have a plan for you after all.'

The beeping of the auspex rouses me from my reminiscences. Life signs, weak but only six kilometres north of our current position. I turn to issue orders to Arias and Gethel but they are already aboard their bikes, and revving the engines.

Maintaining the high vantage point along the ridge, we gun along in single file, the lone set of tracks making it impossible for an enemy to judge our numbers should anybody be following us. Despite the rough terrain, a Space Marine bike is a hardy vehicle and even bouncing over rocks and rents in the earth is capable of near top speeds. Even at close to two hundred kilometres per hour my enhanced senses allow me to take in my surroundings with almost total recall and I filter out the greens and browns of the tree canopies far below, seeking out other colours that may give away the enemy position.

There. A flash of crimson for the briefest of moments. A pauldron or vambrace. Certainly power armour and certainly hostile.

I glance behind me and both Arias and Gethel acknowledge the sighting but none of us stop, or even slow down. The engine noise and dust cloud thrown up by the bikes mean the enemy know we're here, but they don't yet know we've spotted them and that information may yet prove crucial in the coming engagement.

COMPANY MASTER BALTHASAR

‘Master Balthasar, this is Arion. We’ve sighted the enemy. They’re in the forest about ten kilometres north-west of your position.’ The sergeant’s voice is loud in my helmet vox as he struggles to make himself heard over the sound of a bike engine at full throttle.

‘Acknowledged. Any idea of numbers? Troop types?’ I’m signalling to Raphael to ready his squad and move out. The encounter with the living undergrowth has shaken the tactical squad, nothing more, and our objective yet awaits us. I still don’t know the true nature of the Hellfire Stone but if Kranon the Relentless and the Crimson Slaughter desire it and have laid waste to half a dozen worlds to acquire it then they have to be stopped.

‘Negative. I’m going to sweep back again but don’t want to give away that we’re aware of their position. I’ll make it look like it’s a routine patrol route.’

‘Most prudent, Sergeant Arion, but don’t delay too much in getting back to us. I need you close in case we have to unleash death.’

‘Understood,’ comes his reply.

I turn to issue the order to move out but Turmiel is already heading in the exact direction Arion had told me the enemy were located.

‘Shall we just follow him?’ Raphael scoffs, though I am unsure if his derision is aimed at the aloof Librarian or me.

Raphael and Heskia take point on our march through the forest, the sergeant ensuring that if the undergrowth should come alive again then

the big guns are to the fore. The rest of the tactical squad follow behind in single file while Turmiel walks beside me, though from his demeanour you cannot tell that there is anybody else within a thousand kilometres, let alone eleven of his battle-brothers alongside him.

+I think it is exactly what it sounds like.+

I go to blink-click the activation rune for my helmet vox but stop when I realise that Turmiel is speaking to me telepathically.

'What is?' I vocalise to prove a point.

+The Hellfire Stone. I believe it is literally a stone. It is Khornate in origin and followers of that particular dark god are not renowned for their subtlety or guile. The Hellfire part of the name, I'm less sure of. It could be literal but I suspect instead some pomposity went into its naming, a definite Khornate trait.+

'And what do you think the Crimson Slaughter want with it exactly? What purpose does it serve?' Battle-Brother Joash, marching right in front of me, turns in response but I motion sideways with my head towards Turmiel. Joash nods in acknowledgment and turns back without breaking stride.

+Of that I am unsure. Almost certainly some kind of ritualistic element, yet another Khornate trait, but to what end? Perhaps I should contact Seraphicus and see if he has–+

'I'm sure the Chaplain will let us know when he's extracted what he needs without you having to invade his head, Librarian.'

+Of course. I sometimes forget how unsettling telepathic communication can be for the non-psyker. What about precognition?+

'What do you mean, precognition?'

+Does precognition make you feel uncomfortable? Does my ability to peer through the strands of the warp and pull together the threads into cogent visions of the future unnerve you, Company Master?+

'Not particularly, why?'

+Because in approximately three seconds I suggest you duck.+

'What?'

Turmiel draws his bolt pistol and aims it towards the tall grass that the forest has begun to thin out into. He squeezes the trigger just as a tattooed figure emerges from the undergrowth and screams: 'Death to the lackeys of the–'

His declaration goes unfinished as Turmiel's shot finds its mark between the cultist's eyes and turns his head to a fine red mist. He has

holstered the pistol and unsheathed his force sword before the cultist’s headless body has even hit the ground.

+I did try to warn you,+ he sends before charging towards the other tattooed figures now beginning to emerge from cover.

ANARKUS,
CULTIST LEADER

I have waited my entire life for this moment.

The skeins of fate have drawn tight around this precise point in time, my entire existence channelled towards this instant. From the difficult labour that killed my mother, through the rampant alcoholism that claimed my father, and beyond the gates of the Ecclesiarchy orphanage on Gethsemane VII where I was cared for until I was old enough to work in the gas mines, the tides of fortune have carried me inexorably towards my destiny.

Today is the day I am going to slay a Space Marine.

This is no idle boast, nor crazed hyperbole. I have known ever since I was a child that I have been marked for greatness. It was obvious from the way I could run rings around the orphanage tutors on matters of the Imperial Creed, how I was always bigger and stronger than the other children of my age. It was obvious when they put my father into the cold, permafrosted ground and I didn't even shed a tear. Obvious when I made my first kill aged only nine, my main rival for the orphanage's sporting prize, and even the way I disposed of the body down a well to make it look like an accident was a sign of my true greatness. And when the Black Crusade came to Gethsemane VII that greatness was finally recognised.

Fire rained down from the heavens along with hundreds of thousands of cultists, mutants and even more powerful followers of the Four. The atrocities they wrought made my blood sing as villages and mining settlements fell beneath their onslaught. Banners were fashioned from the flayed skin of their victims and half-living trophies adorned their

tanks and war machines. With the outlying territories razed and pillaged their attention turned to the cities and I knew that I had to do something to welcome my new masters, to commemorate my ascension into their ranks.

So I set to work.

By the time the leader of the first warband to reach the orphanage swung open the unlocked gates my tribute was ready. There, sat atop the corpses of the one hundred and seventeen souls I had butchered in the name of the Four, was I, waiting to greet them.

One of his lieutenants, a brute of a man with hooks embedded in his flesh by way of adornment, was so enraged that I had robbed them of their prize – pure, unsullied souls to dedicate to their master or put into the service of the Black Crusade – that he took aim at me with his weapon, to claim my soul by way of recompense. But my new master knew potential when he saw it and ran the lieutenant through with the great barbed sword he carried at his side.

I laughed as both halves of his severed body fell messily to the floor and my master and the rest of his warband did likewise, revelling in yet more bloodshed. The lieutenant's corpse was picked clean by his former comrades-in-arms and his axe gifted to me by my master. Though the weapon was inelegant and brutish, it was a more effective killing tool than the kitchen blades I had used to murder my fellow orphans and tutors and in the days that followed would add greatly to my kill tally as the Black Crusade swept on.

When the fight against the Imperial forces on Gethsemane VII was over and the last of its citizens either lay dead or were in the employ of the Black Crusade, the warbands turned on each other in an attempt to sate the lingering battlelust. For days more, constant battle raged between erstwhile allies as cult after cult vied for the attentions of the Chaos Space Marines at the head of the Crusade. Our ranks swelled even more over the course of the fighting as the heads of three cults were slain by my master and their servants subsumed into the ranks of our own warband, and by the time we boarded the orbiting vessels our loyalty had been sworn to a Traitor Astartes of no small renown.

The days turned into weeks, the weeks into months and from battlefield to battlefield, planet to planet, I killed in the name of my masters and in dedication to the Four. The more I venerated my dark lords the higher my status rose, both among them and the gods. Changes,

subtle at first but then more drastic, were wrought upon my flesh and my visage began to resemble that of my brethren, more pleasing to the eyes of the Ruinous Powers. The time between battles became like torture. My sole purpose, the path I was on and could not be swerved from, was to kill in the name of my masters and being denied the opportunity was like starving me of oxygen.

Infighting broke out amongst us during the long transits through the warp to reach the next killing ground and other like-minded souls rallied around me as new factions sprang up within the warband. One of the cults we'd previously subsumed viewed killing as an artform, as a thing of beauty and creativity, and its members found an affinity with me. With their strength to my arm my standing within the warband grew exponentially and the next time I threw myself into butchering the lackeys of the Corpse-Emperor it was at my master's right hand. We slew like there was no tomorrow and it was glorious, so glorious that we caught the attention of a new master.

Kranon the Relentless.

The Traitor Astartes at the head of the Crusade had fallen in a personal duel with the leader of the Crimson Slaughter and Kranon had made it clear that he had his own agenda to pursue rather than assuming the mantle of leader. Those warbands that wanted to continue on the Crusade could do so freely but any that wanted to fight under his banner would be accepted with open arms. The Crimson Slaughter had a fearsome reputation as bloodthirsty butchers, constantly looking for their next kill, and that appealed to me. Sadly, my master didn't see things the same way.

As his corpse slid from my axe head, he eyed me with such disappointment. 'We were destined for greatness, Anarkus,' were the final words he uttered through blood-stained teeth, but he'd already relinquished his grip on life by the time I responded.

'I still am.'

SERGEANT RAPHAEL, TACTICAL SQUAD RAPHAEL

With combat imminent my senses augment and the world around me slows, allowing me to take in the battlefield and make the optimum decisions for my squad and I to emerge victorious. One cultist has already fallen to Turmiel's well-placed shot but nine more spring from the undergrowth and unleash a volley of fire towards us.

My Lyman's ear filters out the other battlefield noise and while the shells are still mid-air I ascertain that the cultists are using autopistols and turn my shoulder towards the shots aimed at me. All three deflect harmlessly off the armour plating and, with their positions now revealed, I return fire at the enemy, my shots both measured and aimed, the plasma pistol's heat apparent even through my armoured gauntlet. Their dark masters must be watching over them this day as only one of my shots finds its mark and a cultist falls to the ground, briefly spasming before going limp as the rest of his body realises that the right hemisphere of his brain is no longer where it should be.

More fire from the undergrowth, but sustained and accurate this time. A white-haired cultist in a storm coat is directing the fire and appears to know what he is doing.

As one, Squad Raphael sense the subtle shift in the tide of the battle and seek cover accordingly. Nine of us make it in time but Regulus goes down hard, a shotgun blast to the knee robbing him of his balance, and as he raises his head to make a retaliatory shot several well-placed autogun rounds take him through the visor of his Mark V helmet, blood gushing from the cracked lens. He relinquishes his grip on his bolter and his prone form is peppered with yet more fire from the cultists, but it is

futile. His identifier rune turns from green to red on my display to indicate that Regulus is dead. Another Dark Angel fallen on the field of battle.

For the merest fraction of a second all combat activity ceases. Imperceptible to most but to a veteran Adeptus Astartes sergeant it registers as an age. ‘Avenge him!’ I yell, and my squad lay down a withering barrage of fire before advancing while the cultists cower behind cover, their tactics evolving in light of the apparent skill of their foe.

While no Space Marine actively seeks his own end, the very nature of what we do means that it is always at our shoulder. In the main, we are the dealers of death, our primary purpose to kill and to kill well; but this brings us into contact with others of like mind, though rarely of comparable skill, and although still rare, the demise of a Space Marine is something that occurs with alarming regularity in these dark times. All Space Marines are conditioned to accept death, be it their own or that of a battle-brother, and while Squad Raphael’s reaction to the slaying of one of their own is testimony to the bond between them, it was an unacceptable lapse during the heat of combat. Once we are back on board the *Sword of Caliban* I will have Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus drill them in the Litanies of Woe and Loss and remind them to channel any sense of grief into acts of violence against the foes of the Emperor.

Sensing that their position is about to be overrun, the enemy’s next move is entirely unexpected. Rather than laying down covering fire and retreating, they do the exact opposite and charge towards the onrushing power-armoured figures.

Brother Heskia wheels around with his plasma cannon and sends a gout of white-hot energy in the direction of four enemy combatants, but they are too quick and all Heskia kills is a large patch of undergrowth that smoulders and crackles as the heat vitrifies the scorched earth beneath.

The cultists continue their charge, clubs and knives raised, and Brother Selaphiel opens fire with his bolter. One of them goes down, his left arm shorn off at the shoulder, the stump spurting thick crimson gore, but three of them remain standing and barrel into the Dark Angel, dragging him to the ground and setting about him with their close-combat weapons.

Selaphiel grips one about the throat and chokes the life from him as he pathetically attempts to bludgeon the felled Space Marine, and Master Balthasar disintegrates the skull of another, but the third cultist is able to jam his serrated blade into the soft seal between Selaphiel's helmet and chestplate. Selaphiel grips the cultist's hooded face and pushes his fingers through the eye-slit before penetrating the Chaos worshipper's brain cavity. In one final defiant act, the bare-chested cultist twists the knife a hundred and eighty degrees, a fountain of blood coating his naked torso.

Another identifier rune flashes from green to red.

In the half-century and more that I have served the Dark Angels as a sergeant, I have only ever lost four battle-brothers under my command and in the space of just a few seconds, I have lost half that number again.

No more.

We are Adeptus Astartes with direct lineage to the first founded Legion. We are no mere successor Chapter, nor one raised during later foundings. We are the sons of the Lion and our Chapter bears the same name as his great Legion did throughout the Great Crusade and the black days that followed. We carry his genetic legacy and with it the pride of knowing that we are the Emperor's finest, first among equals. Two Dark Angels have laid down their lives this day and that is two too many. More blood will be shed before this battle is through but it will be us doing the shedding; more lives will end here upon this distant world but we will be death's agents.

I will not rest until the enemy is slain and our mission is through, so swears Sergeant Constantin Raphael of the Dark Angels Fifth Company.

TETCHVAR,
CULTIST LEADER

Dark Angels. The irony is so palpable I can practically taste it.

It was them, they made me like this. Not literally, of course, I have my new masters to thank for my ‘enhancements’, but had it not been for the inaction of the Dark Angels then I wouldn’t be here today.

It was fifteen standard Terran years ago. Or was it twenty? Warp travel wreaks havoc with time perception. Regardless, I’d just finished campaigning against the greenskins in the Khapanesk Junction where I’d been responsible for the discipline of three entire regiments of Golmeynian Equinaars – bloody savages to a man but the finest beast riders I’d ever seen – when the order came down from Segmentum command that I was to ship out to somewhere called the Procel system and hook up with a newly founded regiment who were the only thing standing in the way of a full-blown arch-enemy invasion of almost a dozen worlds.

I had been expecting the worst. A freshly raised regiment made up of gas miners, petty bureaucrats and boy soldiers was far from ideal in the face of what the enemy were throwing against us but they applied themselves well and, having endured centuries of raids by ork and eldar pirates, their cities and settlements were well defended.

A little too well defended, as it happened.

As the Chaos advance stalled all across the system, more and more forces poured in on both sides and the campaign became bogged down. Siege situations arose in all of the major population centres and on the distant gas-mining moon where my regiment was stationed, it was no different. With enemy ships blockading the moon, ground forces were

able to encircle us. The mining fort we'd chosen to hole up in because of its easily defensible position high upon the ridge of a crater soon became our prison, and very nearly became our tomb.

The first few months were comparatively easy. Blasting us from orbit was out of the question as the vast gas deposits on which we sat would cause a nova that would wipe out any ships within several parsecs. And besides, it was the gas deposits the Chaos forces were interested in, otherwise they wouldn't have bothered with a moon lying so far out from the core worlds of the system. Our high vantage point meant it was impossible for the enemy to move artillery close enough to bombard us and any foot assault was slow and laboured thanks to the steep incline of the slope heading up towards the fortress. Anti-personnel mines and heavy bolter batteries soon dealt with anybody who got too close to our position. During the first seven months of the siege, we lost only two of the Procel troops and both of those were down to mine-laying accidents.

And that was part of the problem.

The remote mining fortresses of the Procel system were not only designed to withstand marauding pirates and, as we were discovering, the attentions of an invading Chaos force, but also to be entirely self-sufficient for extended periods of time. Power generation was a formality thanks to the gas reserves and advanced purification systems meant we never ran short of clean water, but food? That was a different matter entirely.

Under normal circumstances, a mining fortress would comfortably accommodate around a thousand miners and associated support staff for two years before it needed resupplying. In the event that the resupply was delayed, there was an additional store of a year's worth of emergency rations in a vault below the fortress. Because there were upwards of five thousand men currently calling the facility home, even with strict rationing the emergency supplies were almost exhausted by the end of the first year.

In a standard siege situation, a form of bizarre natural selection comes into play whereby the smaller the ration supply gets the longer it seems to last thanks to the population dwindling due to disease contracted from dirty drinking water and casualties from the conflict. With neither factor contributing to thin our numbers we still had almost as many mouths to feed as the day that we first locked the gates of the fortress. The enemy's

strategy was now plain for us all to see: they were simply going to starve us out and march boldly into the fortress once we were all dead.

But they weren't finished with us just yet.

At night, when we fought to sleep through the pain in our bellies due to the hunger, they whispered to us in our nightmares. They made promises to us that we would come to no harm, that if we opened the gates and let them in then they would give us a ship and grant us safe passage away from the moon. They showed us other things, too. The rewards that would be ours if we took up arms against our comrades and threw in our lot with them, not just let them have what they sought but took an active role in obtaining it for them. Power. Glory. Life.

It's another irony of my life that by sending us those dreams they made our food supply last that little bit longer. Knowing that some of the Procel troops would be tempted, myself and the commissar cadets under my command took to sleeping by the main gate. In the week following the first of the dreams, the population of the mining fortress dropped by almost two hundred. But the dreams were unrelenting.

Whether it was because the enemy knew I was in charge of the defence or for some other unfathomable reason, my nightmares were the worst. They showed me at the head of an enemy force leading vast armies across Imperial worlds, laying waste to all before me while my power grew. In the dreams I was me, but also more than me. My face still looked the same but altered somehow, my visage more terrifying, and my hair was white, like an albino's. Every night for a month the enemy sent these images into my dreams and every night for a month I woke the next morning in a cold sweat.

The first inkling I had that the dreams were having an effect on me was when I no longer felt any revulsion at consuming human flesh.

At first, the summary executions were a deterrent – a warning to others not to heed the voices in their dreams – but then, with the food supply rapidly dwindling, one of the commissar cadets was caught roasting the cadaver of one of the deserters. I executed him on the spot, naturally, but the looks in the eyes of the other cadets and the conscripted men told me that all of them would have done the same. I had to reassert my authority, had to maintain control of the situation so that the men didn't mutiny and let the enemy at the gates into the fortress. Word had reached us over the long-range vox that the Dark Angels Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes had entered the Procel system and even now were liberating worlds one

at a time. If only we could hold out for a while longer then we would be saved. I decreed that from that point forwards, starting with the cadet I'd just shot through the back of the head, any man caught trying to open the gates would not only be killed but his body consumed so that those he was attempting to betray might yet live. Only a dozen more men tried to desert before the message got through.

With our new food supply curtailed, I imposed stricter rules within the fortress, making many more infractions punishable by death. One man was executed for leaving a window ajar after smoking a lho-stick in his bunk room, another for reporting for duty with bloodstains on his tunic. Eventually the cadets and I were looking for any excuse to add another body to the morgue and the only thing preventing the enlisted men from mutinying was that they knew that by doing this we were ensuring they were fed to survive another day.

Over time, my nightmares got worse. In one recurring dream, I was at the head of a banquet held by the besieging forces in my honour but on every platter at the table was the charred corpse of a Procel trooper or commissar cadet. In another, the mining fortress was ablaze and I watched, laughing, as men roasted on spits while a voice whispered to me, 'You've broken the last taboo. Join us. Join us.'

In the end, there was only one recurring nightmare. In it, the cadets had turned on me and, while I was still alive and fully aware of what was happening to me, they feasted on my flesh and entrails, gorging themselves while the conscripted men looked on hungrily, waiting for their turn at the table.

Upon awakening on the third consecutive night of experiencing this dream I received a message over the long-range vox that the Dark Angels had ceased operations in the Procel system after liberating the core worlds and had moved on to their next theatre of war. Returning to the gatehouse, I murdered the cadets in their sleep and let the enemy in.

The slaughter that followed made the cannibalism I'd endured look like playground games. Whereas we had killed for survival, the enemy – who were not my enemy now – killed for fun. They could have made good on their whispered promises to set us free, given us a ship and safe passage, but instead they chose to punish us for our defiance, even though it was the path of most resistance. Men, still-living men, were hung from barbs and hooks on the walls and left to bleed out slowly, a long agonising death as opposed to the swift killings I had meted out.

The halls of the fortress were filled with the death cries of conscripted men and their symphony of barbarism accompanied me as I was brought before the enemy leader.

A brute of a man – though he had long since ceased being a man in the true sense of the word – the Chaos Space Marine I was forced to kneel before was even larger than the greenskins I had faced at Khapanesk. He told me of his surprise that it was a commissar who had been the one to relent and open the gates, that the very symbol of loyalty to the Imperium would turn betrayer.

'The Imperium betrayed me first,' I spat.

This pleased him and I genuinely believe that single comment saved my life.

'Well, commissar,' he said, grinning. 'It's time you received the reward you were promised.'

I was taken on board one of the enemy vessels – though, of course, by now they were no longer my enemy – and placed in a hold amongst the cultists and mutants that made up the bulk of their forces. That first night two attempts were made on my life, my new master finding it amusing to stitch my commissar's storm coat to my flesh in such a manner that removing it would cause me to bleed to death. Its continued presence marks me as a target for the degenerates I would now fight alongside.

As time passed, the murder bids ceased as the hand-to-hand combat skills I had picked up from the Golmeynians allowed me to work my way up through the hierarchy below decks and, by the first time we made planetfall, I had not only acquired a weapon but also a small warband of well-armed cultists.

Emerging into torrential rain from the rear hatch of the troop lander onto the nameless Imperial world which I was to help to lay waste, another of my life's ironies occurred to me: I had gone from being a paragon of discipline to a disciple of Chaos. Smiling, I looked down at my reflection in a puddle. My face still looked the same but altered somehow, my visage more terrifying, and my hair was white, like an albino's.

Smiling again, I led my men towards the enemy to kill for my new masters.

BATTLE-BROTHER HESKIA

My brothers will not die in vain this day. Their sacrifice will be remembered, their glories recorded in the annals of our Chapter, because there but for the grace of the Lion and the Emperor go I.

It was my failure that caused Selaphiel's death, my inability to hit the target that allowed the cultists to reach him, and for that I must atone. Though his killers lie dead there are still more enemies on this field of battle and it is my sacred duty to Emperor and primarch and my honour duty to my fallen battle-brother to ensure that none shall live to see another sunrise.

The heat of the plasma cannon feels reassuring against my body, the whine of the weapon spooling up a glorious overture with which to strike fear into the hearts of the enemies of the Imperium. The weapon's song reaches its crescendo and a chorus of searing plasma bursts forth, two more cultists claimed in balance against the souls of my fallen brothers. The enemy rout and scatter through the undergrowth towards a clearing up ahead. Squad Raphael make to give chase, to finish what we've started, but Master Balthasar stays our hand.

'Regroup and advance on me, attack formation Nemiel minus two,' the Master's voice crackles over the vox-link. 'Arion reported a potential Traitor Astartes presence and I do not want us stumbling blindly into another ambush.'

My hearts sink upon hearing the order. Attack formation Nemiel is a long-established combat formation with two staggered ranks providing maximum visibility and firing opportunities, though it is best employed by a full tactical squad of ten Space Marines. The minus two is a stark reminder of the losses the enemy has already inflicted upon us. Though it

sits ill with me leaving their bodies behind, I know we will be back later to recover their gene-seed. Though their war is over, their legacy shall live on in the next generation of Dark Angels.

Without giving it further thought, I fall into formation behind Master Balthasar along with the other survivors of Squad Raphael and, augmented by my power armour, set off at a sprint through the undergrowth.

We pause upon reaching the edge of the clearing. It is empty save for a slow-moving cultist who is dragging his wounded left leg as he attempts to reach the other side. Brother Simiel raises his bolter to take aim but Sergeant Raphael places his hand on top of the barrel and gently lowers the weapon. The sergeant motions to the blood trail the cultist is leaving and Simiel nods his understanding.

The Master's voice breaks across the vox-link once more. 'Brothers Heskia and Orion, perhaps you would be so kind as to lead the way. After all, you have more recent memories of being members of the Scout Company than the rest of us.'

If the comment had been made between two Imperial Guardsmen, or even battle-brothers of a less disciplined Chapter, then it would likely have been made with malice or humour behind it but, coming as it did from the Company Master of the Dark Angels Fifth Company, it was instead born of pragmatism. We have a mission to complete, fallen brothers to avenge, and even though we are several years out of the Scout Company, Orion and I remember it as if it were only yesterday.

Following the trail of blood, Orion and I take point and lead our squad further into the dense undergrowth.

COMPANY MASTER BALTHASAR

What would Zadakiel have done?

Heskia feels the loss of his battle-brothers keenly, that much I know. He is still young and very much a stranger to losing a squad member. He probably blames himself for the death of Selaphiel despite doing everything within his power to prevent it, but now that sense of grief is what is driving him on. My decision to have him and Orion spearhead the formation is not just a tactical decision, it is one of morale too. Heskia needs to know I haven't lost faith in him, that his squad haven't lost faith in him. Is that what Zadakiel would have done or would he have left it to Raphael to make the call?

The undergrowth begins to thin out again and, with Heskia covering him, Orion advances ahead to the next clearing. He disappears from view and seconds later the bark of his bolter breaks the silence of the forest, followed by the intense noise and heatwash of Heskia's plasma cannon.

'Situation report?' I ask over the vox-link, already on my feet and headed towards the edge of the new clearing. The initial response is the sound of bolter and autogun shots in answer to Orion and Heskia's fire before Orion's voice breaks over the link.

'Traitor Astartes,' he rasps, as if the words were a poison he was ejecting from his body. 'Three of them along with the handful of cultists we didn't wipe out.' The rest of Squad Raphael take up positions in cover behind the treeline and commence firing. Turmiel draws alongside me and our pistols begin raining death on the enemy's position.

+There are more than three,+ Turmiel's voice echoes in my head.

'You're certain?' Again I vocalise my response over the vox.

+Absolutely. There are at least five more souls in this forest and… something else.+

‘What do you mean “something else”?’

+It is unclear to me at the present. I sense great rage and confusion. Something that is but should not be.+

‘Arion?’ I say switching vox-channels.

‘Company Master.’ His response is near instantaneous.

‘We’ve come under heavy fire. Orion is reporting that there are three Traitor Astartes along with the cultists we’ve already encountered but Turmiel is convinced that there are more. Get down here now and be ready with the teleport homer.’

‘Already on my way. We started converging on your position the instant we heard the gunfire.’

‘And Arion?’ I turn to face Turmiel. ‘Be careful. Our Librarian thinks there’s something else out there too.’

‘Understood,’ the Ravenwing sergeant says before killing the link.

‘In the name of the Throne I hope you’re wrong, Turmiel,’ I say, switching channels once more.

+In this instance, I concur.+

SERGEANT ARION

The forest rushes by in a green blur, the noise of my bike's engine masking the sound of branches snapping and the undergrowth tearing beneath me. Behind me, Arias maintains a safe distance, ready to react should I make a sudden swerve or turn at high speed to avoid a tree or other obstacle barring our path. At the rear of our convoy Gethel rides one-handed, a teleport homer primed in his other ready to be planted in the ground once we reach our objective. Both are ready for the coming battle but I know that, like me, they yearn to be hunting different prey.

Though we share bonds of comradeship and brotherhood in much the same way as other Dark Angels, my squad and I share something much deeper, a secret that our Chapter has kept for ten millennia. We are keepers of the knowledge that when Horus and the Traitor Legions rose up against the Emperor and embraced Chaos, many Dark Angels did likewise.

With the war for the Imperium raging across the galaxy, our great primarch, the Lion, headed out from our home world of Caliban to make war against those who would betray his father, the God-Emperor of Mankind, leaving behind almost half his Legion. Luther – leader of the knights of Caliban before the coming of the Lion – was left in command but, as the Lion cut a swathe across the Imperium, liberating the worlds of man from Horus's forces, Luther became jealous and twisted. Cut off from the rest of the Imperium by violent warp storms, those Dark Angels left behind took to strange practices and dalliances with the Ruinous Powers, the very planet itself being corrupted by the dark energies they invoked.

Griefstricken at the death of his father, the Lion returned to Caliban only to be fired upon by the planetary defences. Incensed, the Lion led his half of the Legion against the other and, though Horus's heresy had been halted, brother once again fought brother on the home world of the First Legion.

While the Dark Angels fleet pounded the planet from orbit, the primarch hunted down his traitorous brother and engaged him in a duel. Both men were near-equals in terms of combat prowess but in turning to Chaos, Luther had been granted many boons and he unleashed dark magicks upon the primarch, mortally wounding him.

Life rapidly draining from his body, the Lion's final act was to run his brother through with the Lion Blade but the Chaos powers had one card left to play. Enraged at the slaying of their chosen one, they opened a warp rift which tore our home world apart, taking with it our traitorous brethren and the body of our primarch. Of Caliban, only our fortress-monastery remained, floating in space upon an asteroid – the Rock – and in time this would once again become our home.

As the centuries passed, we came to realise that the Fallen Dark Angels had not all been killed when the warp rift opened but were still at large within the Imperium, living reminders of our Chapter's darkest hour. With the liberation of the worlds Horus conquered almost complete, the Dark Angels now found themselves with a new mission: to hunt down the Fallen and return them to the Rock for our Interrogator-Chaplains to make them repent their sins against the Legion.

This is the tale that Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus told to me upon my ascension to the Ravenwing and the same tale I passed down to Arias and Gethel upon theirs. This knowledge spurs us on and though we reserve especial zeal for hunting down those traitor Dark Angels, we seek to smite the foes of the Imperium in whatever form they may take.

'Sergeant Arion. Up ahead.' Arias's warning cuts across the vox-link just in time as the trees in front of me disintegrate in a blinding flash.

I swerve to avoid driving on through the now blazing vegetation and the two bikes behind me open fire at the melta beam's point of origination. Several bolter rounds fly in their direction by way of reply and they too are forced to swerve to avoid being hit. Another melta beam strikes the ground, so close this time that it strips the paint from the front wheelguard of my bike. I too return fire in the direction of the beam but

the thick black smoke that now fills the forest makes it impossible to tell whether I hit anything.

‘Arion? We hear combat. Is that you?’ Master Balthasar’s voice crackles in my ear.

‘Affirmative. Melta and bolter fire. I can’t see the enemy through the smoke but I’d estimate about five or six from the rate of fire.’ More bolter shells *spang* off my bike’s armour plating as if to punctuate the sentence.

‘You need to make it to our position in the clearing otherwise our brothers in orbit won’t have a safe teleportation zone.’

An inaccurate technology at the best of times, teleportation requires a large, clear transit site to reduce the risk of the teleportee materialising in the same space as a pre-existing object. ‘Acknowledged. We’ll take the long way round,’ I say, signalling to the other two Ravenwing.

Another melta beam scores a hit in the spot I’ve just vacated, and my rear tyre blisters under the intense heat. Kicking up a thick cloud of dust from the forest floor, all three bikes turn and head back in the direction we just came from, doubling back to speed around the enemy blocking our path and deliver the teleport homer. A barrage of bolter fire sends us on our way, and Gethel takes a round to the shoulder but does not relinquish his grip on the beacon.

Twisting the throttle as far as it will go, I glance back over my shoulder. From the forest, crimson-clad Traitor Marines are emerging, futilely attempting to give chase. I am just about to vox a report to Master Balthasar when something behind them draws my attention. Above the pall of smoke that has settled at ground level, tree canopies are collapsing at an alarming rate, as if the ground beneath them is disappearing and swallowing them up. As the falling trees get closer to the Traitor Astartes position a shadow forms in the smoke, growing ever larger until at last it emerges from under the grey blanket and bellows an unnatural cry.

I reestablish the vox-link to the Company Master. ‘Confirmation. Five Traitor Astartes, one of them possibly a Chaos Lord judging by the wargear.’

‘Good work, Sergeant Arion. Make haste to our position and we’ll make sure these traitorous scum have a surprise waiting for them when they get here.’

‘There’s one other thing, Master Balthasar.’

‘What’s that?’
‘A Helbrute is with them.’

COMPANY MASTER BALTHASAR

Arion's words cut me to the marrow. A Helbrute – just like the one that killed Master Zadakiel on Stern's Remembrance. The same one, perhaps?

Of all the vile abominations the arch-enemy fielded few were as debased as the Helbrute save perhaps the denizens of the daemon realm. Similar to Adeptus Astartes Dreadnoughts, Helbrutes are the armoured tombs in which warriors are placed so that they may continue to serve their gods. Unlike Space Marine Dreadnoughts, though, which are the vessels by which great heroes may live on beyond grievous wounds, zealous Traitor Astartes willingly inter their healthy bodies within them where the warp can ravage and reshape them. Unable to comprehend their new condition, most are driven completely insane and become as much a danger to their own side as a threat to the opposition.

More fire rakes my position from the opposite side of the clearing and I am forced to shelter behind the thick trunk of a tree. Splinters of bark shower me as the autogun rounds bite into the shell of the tree and, when the shooter ceases firing to reload, I emerge from cover and retaliate with a shot from my plasma pistol. The cultist screams in pain as the left side of his body melts away, filling the clearing with the stench of burnt meat. The remaining cultists and Chaos Marines divert all of their fire to me and the distraction gives Squad Raphael the time to make it to the other side of the clearing.

A Traitor Astartes with twin lightning claws springs from behind cover and tears vast rents in the chestplate of Tennin. The Dark Angel staggers backwards but before the red-armoured Traitor has a chance for a follow-

up strike, Kerael puts a shot from his plasma gun into the heretic's upper body, melting his right pauldron to slag. Two more red figures emerge from the lush forest and their combined fire forces Kerael and Tennin back before either can deliver the killing strike to the clawed Traitor. All three dive for cover a second later as Heskia opens up with his plasma cannon, felling all the trees on one side of the clearing.

The white-haired cultist in the storm coat makes to fire his shotgun into the side of Heskia's head but my enhanced physiology means I am able to raise my plasma pistol and shear his arm off at the elbow before he has time to depress the trigger. He falls to his knees, fumbling for the dropped rifle, but I cross the distance between us before he is able to locate it. I draw my power sword from its scabbard and activate it. Aiming the thrumming blade at his heart, I notice the two dark patches in the shape of the Imperial aquila on the shoulders of his coat. I look down at him and he stares back at me defiantly.

'Dying holds no fear for me. I embrace it in the same way I have embraced all the horrors in my life.' He spits a gob of red phlegm at me. It lands on my ivory robe and slowly slides down it, leaving a bloody streak in its wake.

'Perhaps not,' I say, disengaging the power stud of the sword. The humming ceases and the blue corona of energy dies like a guttering flame. 'But let's see if you develop some as you bleed to death.'

With a single stroke I take his remaining arm off at the shoulder, and then both legs at the knee. He opens his mouth to scream but the shock of amputation is too great for him to handle and no sound emerges. He lies there thrashing wildly on the floor of the clearing, rapidly bleeding out through his three uncauterised wounds.

Heskia nods his thanks as his weapon spools up again and, once fully charged, he sprays the treeline with molten plasma, turning the Crimson Slaughters' cover to smouldering kindling. The three newly exposed Traitors pull further back into the forest and Squad Raphael move up.

Turmiel draws up alongside me, his force sword slick with Traitors' blood, and at the same instant our Lyman's ears kick in and filter out the noise of the battle and rapidly approaching Ravenwing bikes. There, on the very edges of normal perception, a noise like thunder. No, not thunder, an earthquake.

In the middle distance, the canopy cover is collapsing to the forest floor, driving native bird life skywards, and as the crashing of felled trees

gets ever closer the looming form of the Helbrute hoves into view.

‘Arion, where are you?’ I whisper, without activating my vox-link.

SERGEANT ARION

My bike's engine screeches in protest as I push it to its limit, the dials on its fascia pointing all the way to the right. I swerve at the last second to avoid a tree that looms up on me as if from nowhere but in doing so, drag my damaged rear wheel over sharp rocks. The back end shudders violently and slides away from me but the tyre holds and I recover before I'm thrown from the bike.

Arias and Gethel take evasive manoeuvres and the latter takes the opportunity to slingshot past me and be the first to reach Master Balthasar's position. As he does so, the trees begin to thin out and seconds later we emerge from the gloom of the forest into the relative brightness of the clearing. The roar of engines causes three red-armoured figures to spin on their heels to face us but before they can react, a coordinated burst from our twin-linked bolters shreds one of them where he stands and sends the other two sprawling to the floor.

Gethel is off his bike before it has even come to a halt, the vehicle sliding sideways before coming to rest at the edge of the clearing, wheels still spinning. He flips the top cover of the teleport homer and begins to key in the activation sequence.

Three digits in, the lower half of his body turns to vapour and his torso and the beacon come crashing to the ground. Seconds later, the crimson bulk of the Helbrute emerges from the forest and bellows a hellish warcry.

Instantly it is met by a wall of fire, but the bolter shells bounce off harmlessly while the plasma bursts cause the beast's armour to undulate and bubble unnaturally without inflicting any lasting damage. Seemingly

oblivious to the presence of hostile forces, the Helbrute scans the clearing until it finds what it seeks.

Though mortally wounded, Gethel is clawing his way agonisingly towards the fallen beacon. Realising that it hasn't finished him off, the Helbrute is across the clearing in a couple of strides and, with Gethel less than a metre from the homer, raises a gargantuan foot over him. With a defiant scream, Raphael emerges from cover and charges it, chainsword raised above his head, but with a desultory swat the Helbrute smashes the veteran sergeant away, his crumpled form coming to rest against a charred tree stump.

More bolter and plasma fire rain down on the Helbrute but it is already set upon its ferocious path and the foot drops with a sickening crunch.

Unfazed by the death of his squadmate, Arias revs the engine of his bike, circling the clearing in an effort to build up speed. Attracted by the roar of the engine noise, the Helbrute begins to twist this way and that, attempting to keep the bike within sight, unsure as to Arias's intentions.

After circling the clearing for the fourth time, Arias rapidly spins the handlebars and, locking the throttle, diverts the bike at full speed towards the Helbrute. Waiting until the very last moment, Arias jumps clear of the speeding vehicle and rolls across the clearing as the improvised missile finds its target.

At close to two hundred kilometres per hour the full force of the Space Marine bike strikes the Helbrute in the left leg, fuel tanks igniting in a violent outburst of flame as Mechanicus-forged ceramite grinds against warp-tainted armour plates. As bright orange flame washes over its crimson bulk, the Helbrute lets out an unnatural wail but, despite rocking precariously backwards, the behemoth maintains its balance.

Arias curses audibly over an open vox-channel and picks himself up from the ground. The still revving engine of the bike catches the Helbrute's attention again and, with it distracted, Squad Raphael emerge from cover to attempt to retrieve the homer, but are beaten back as the cultists and Traitor Astartes open fire on them.

Realising that the Helbrute is between himself and the enemy shooters, Arias uses the cover to dash over to the beacon but, just as he is about to retrieve it, five more Crimson Slaughter traitors enter the clearing. Arias draws his bolt pistol and his first two shots hit a Traitor Astartes square in the head, sending him sagging to the ground, blood spilling from the two holes in his horned ceramite helmet. Re-aiming, he doesn't make his

third shot as a blue-cloaked traitor snaps off a single shot with a plasma pistol and opens a hole in the Ravenwing's chest. Arias looks down at the gap where his twin hearts used to be but before he can come to the realisation that he has been unmade, another traitor decapitates him with a power maul.

Seemingly focused by the arrival of these newcomers, the Helbrute diverts its attention from the Ravenwing bike that had been used as a weapon against it, back to the Dark Angels shooting at it from the edge of the clearing.

'Arion, it's down to you now.' Master Balthasar was using the general vox-channel. 'Squad Raphael, concentrate your fire on the Crimson Slaughter. Turmiel, focus your efforts on the one in the blue cloak but be ready for new orders.'

'What about the Helbrute?' I ask, pulling back on the bike's throttle and preparing to release the brakes.

'The Helbrute's mine.'

Both bolters blazing I emerge from the treeline at the same instant as Master Balthasar. Although occupied by Squad Raphael's covering fire, one of the Crimson Slaughter recognises the potential threat I pose and opens fire on me. Two shells embed themselves in my already damaged rear tyre but it once again holds and when I aim the bike's weapons at him, two of my bolter rounds find their mark in his thigh.

In the centre of the clearing, Master Balthasar and the Helbrute are stalking each other like gladiators in an arena; the Company Master pacing back and forth, looking for an opening, while the Helbrute rotates its torso back and forth, keeping the Dark Angel within the sights of its multi-melta.

Approaching the fallen homer, I drop down a gear and release my grip on the handlebars. The change in the pitch of the engine roar distracts the Helbrute and Master Balthasar sees his opening. With the Chaos fiend trying to locate the source of the new sound the Company Master swings about, allowing the combi-plasma gun slung at his back to whip around. In the same motion he grips the handle and squeezes the firing stud, directing a jet of plasma at the Helbrute. The superheated hydrogen makes contact with the left side of the monstrosity's face and, as a reflex action, it screams and fires the multi-melta at the space where only milliseconds before the Company Master was standing. Still continuing the same motion, Master Balthasar is out of the blast zone by the time

the shot is clear of the weapon's barrels and instead of vaporising him, the Helbrute's attempt instead gouges a crater into the clearing. Momentum still driving him on, Master Balthasar hits the ground and rolls, extinguishing the fire started in his robes by proximity to the heat of the blast.

Thrashing and bucking wildly, the wounded Helbrute goes into a frenzy, crashing this way and that. I duck under its flailing power claw but the cultist taking aim at me with his autogun isn't as quick and is eviscerated as the war machine stumbles blindly into the undergrowth.

With the homer in reach, I lean down to grab it with both hands and steer the bike with my knees, avoiding yet more bolter fire aimed in my direction as I speed away with my prize.

Resetting the device, I start to punch in the digits of the activation code but before I can complete the sequence, a red figure in a blue cloak jumps out in front of me, the power sword in his hand coruscating with a nimbus of blue energy. Instinctively I dip my head in anticipation of a decapitating sweep but it does not come. Instead, as my bike speeds past the red warrior, he thrusts the sword into my compromised rear tyre, the energised blade passing through toughened rubber like a fin through water.

Without my hands on the handlebars, I lose control of the bike and it flips on its back wheel, throwing me at speed from the saddle and launching me crashing into a tree which cracks upon the force of impact. Despite curling myself into a ball at the last moment, the breath is driven from my body and a dozen bones break. My enhanced biology kicks in and pain suppressants flood my nervous system while bones instantly begin to fuse themselves and wounds clot.

As I lie here, helpless until my Space Marine physiology repairs my damaged body, a shadow falls across me and I look up to see the blue-robed figure.

'I somehow don't think your Deathwing are going to make it down to reinforce you,' he sneers.

I expected his voice to be amplified by his helmet but it is only towards the end of the sentence that I realise it is the face that adorns his chestplate that is speaking, rather than him.

'I wouldn't be so sure of that,' I say, grimacing through the pain. I unfurl myself to reveal the teleport homer I had so carefully protected during the impact. 'I think they'll be here any moment.'

I press the activation switch just before my world goes black.

SERGEANT BARACHIEL, DEATHWING

‘I tire of waiting, Sergeant Barachiel. We should be down there already engaging the traitors.’

Dardariel’s amplified voice echoes through the vast teleportarium chamber. He checks the ammo feed on his assault cannon for the eighth time in the last five minutes and continues pacing, each step heralded by a loud *clang* as Terminator armour makes contact with adamantium bulkhead.

‘That is not your decision to make, brother. Master Balthasar is in charge of this mission and if he has deemed that we are to be kept in reserve then we respect and honour his decision,’ I reply.

Though Dardariel’s words smack of insubordination, his tone does not, merely a keenness to be in the midst of the battle he knows is raging on Bane’s Landing down below.

‘But his decisions have delayed us reaching here until now. Had he not had us chasing shadows then the Crimson Slaughter would have already been eradicated, their crimes against the Imperium punished.’ It is Mendrion who speaks now, the remnants of his home world accent adding a buzzing quality to his voice.

In most other Space Marine Chapters – in every other company of the Dark Angels, if truth be told – this kind of discussion would be discouraged, possibly punished. As warriors of the Deathwing, the Dark Angels legendary First Company, we are honed to be the warrior elite and entrusted with the darkest secrets of our Chapter. Any one of us could be the next to be called upon to take on the mantle of Company

Master and this elevated position grants us leeway to be frank and forthright in matters of strategy and tactics.

‘Chasing shadows? You call the annihilation of a dark eldar fleet and the destruction of a space hulk “chasing shadows”?’

‘But they weren’t the primary objective of the mission. Instead of pursuing targets of opportunity we should have been pursuing the Traitor Astartes,’ says Varhmiel. A long-serving member of the Ravenwing, his ascension to the First Company occurred only recently and his hunter’s instinct still overrode all other considerations.

There was an element of truth in their words. The operation to wipe out the eldar pirates had taken weeks and in that time the Crimson Slaughter had razed yet another world and put valuable distance between us and them. Though most of the battles had been ship-to-ship, the *Sword of Caliban* engaging the xenos vessels in deep space away from human worlds, Master Balthasar had ordered my squad to teleport aboard the enemy flagship once the rest of the fleet had been vanquished.

Fighting our way through corridors choked by the bodies of the dead and dying, we reached the bridge where I personally executed the pirate leader. His jet-black helm now sits on a shelf in my quarters as a trophy. By allowing my squad to finish the mission in this manner he had granted us the action we so desperately needed after months of just missing the Crimson Slaughter. No Dark Angels had been lost during the battle and a score of human worlds were now free from the threat of marauding xenos.

When the space hulk *Torva Anser* began to register on our long-range auspex, Master Balthasar could have simply ignored it and continued our pursuit of the Crimson Slaughter but as it drifted ever closer and began registering life signs, he ordered Squads Raphael and Barachiel to the Thunderhawks.

Once aboard, the sources of the life signs revealed themselves as a genestealer colony. For hours we culled them, both squads moving from deck to deck, exterminating the xenos wherever we found them. Satisfied that the genestealers were the only presence on board, Master Balthasar ordered us back to the *Sword of Caliban* where the strike cruiser’s bombardment cannon made short work of the space hulk. Once again, our need for battle was quenched and the worlds we had only weeks before freed from the yoke of xenos tyranny would not have to face the threat of a full-blown genestealer infestation.

‘So you cannot see Master Balthasar’s reasoning for either engagement?’ The question is a general one, aimed at every member of the Terminator squad. There is a pause before the final member of the squad, Narcariel, answers.

‘The Fallen.’ His deep baritone resonates through the teleportarium chamber. Mendrion, Varhmiel and Dardariel all turn their helmeted heads to face their battle-brother. ‘The reports from the human worlds who’d suffered attacks from the pirates said they were led by a black-armoured figure. Although all signs pointed to the marauders being xenos, without any surviving witnesses we couldn’t be certain. That’s why he had us teleport aboard; it wasn’t just to give us a taste of action but to get visual confirmation that the eldar weren’t led by one of our corrupted ancestors.’

‘But what about the space hulk?’ Dardariel ventures.

‘Did you know what awaited us before you stepped off the Thunderhawk, Dardariel?’ Varhmiel counters, getting on board Narcariel’s train of thought. ‘Those life signs could have been anything. Tyranids, orks, Traitor Astartes... Master Balthasar wasn’t merely wasting time or attempting to keep us combat-ready, he was being thorough.’

Nods of realisation pass around the squad. A klaxon sounds and the chamber is bathed in a red glow as lights begin to flash. We take our positions in the centre of the chamber, all five of us back-to-back, weapons ready and pointed outwards in anticipation of the fighting that awaits us below.

‘Not only that.’ I raise my voice to be heard over the countdown that has commenced. ‘By keeping us in reserve, Master Balthasar has retained the element of surprise. If the battle on Bane’s Landing is not going our way then we shall reverse the tide. If our brothers lie dead or dying then we shall be the instrument of retribution. Because after all, isn’t retribution the Dark Angels’ way?’

My question hangs in the air unanswered as, in the blink of an eye later, the teleportarium chamber stands empty.

INTERROGATOR-CHAPLAIN SERAPHICUS

‘Wake up.’

The back of my gauntleted hand impacts against the flesh of the heretic’s cheek and his eye opens with a start.

‘Now, where were we?’ I expand the forceps in the wound on his shoulder. He responds with a scream and, just as it looks as if he’s going to pass out again from the pain, I slide a syringe into the side of his neck and depress the plunger.

‘What… what is he doing to me?’ His eye appears to be looking beyond me, as if there is another presence in the room.

‘“He” is ensuring that you remain conscious for the next stage of the interrogation. I don’t want you passing out from the pain and I assure you, there will be plenty of pain.’

He laughs, flecking his lips with blood. ‘Pain? He thinks he knows the meaning of the word.’ Another laugh, and his eye focuses on me now. ‘Let me down from here and I’ll show you the *true* meaning of pain.’

He rattles the shackles binding him to the wall of the interrogation chamber. Even if he hadn’t been weakened by days of torture, the adamantium bonds would hold even the strongest Traitor Astartes, having done so quite successfully on many previous occasions.

Ignoring him, I continue my questioning.

‘Who do you keep talking to? All subcutaneous communication devices were torn from your flesh when you were brought aboard. I know this for a fact as I removed them myself.’ I move over to the table at the rear of the chamber and pick up a serrated blade. ‘Are you speaking to your gods? A prayer before dying?’

Blade in hand, I slowly approach the prisoner, fixing him with my gaze. He says nothing, but returns my stare.

‘For the last time, who do you keep speaking to?’

Several seconds pass in silence before I ram the serrated blade into the base of his ribcage and drive it upwards into the bottom of his multi-lung. He lets out a half-scream, half-wheeze and blood spurts from his nostrils. I am just about to drive the blade even further in when he speaks.

‘Them. I’m speaking to them.’

‘Who do you mean? Who are they?’ My grip on the knife tightens. If the next answer isn’t a straight one then I will twist the blade.

‘The Balethu. The ghosts of the Balethu,’ he says in a voice that is not his own. His body relaxes, as if unburdening himself of this information has granted him physical relief. I relinquish my grip on the blade but leave it embedded in his torso.

‘The Balethu?’ I cradle his jaw in my hand and lift his head to face me. His eyeball has rolled in its socket, leaving only bloodshot white showing. ‘Who are the Balethu?’

‘The inhabitants of a jungle world called Umidia. At least we were until the Crimson Sabres arrived and slaughtered us all like cattle. We prayed to Khor’en to make the killing end but our god revels in the shedding of blood and our calls went unheeded, or so we thought. Though our physical bodies were dead our souls lived on beyond their severing from our corporeal forms and we attached ourselves to those who had butchered us, haunting their waking moments and slowly driving them insane.’

‘So who is it who seeks the Hellfire Stone? The Balethu or the Crimson Slaughter?’

‘Both, but for different reasons.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Crimson Slaughter, gullible fools that they are, seek the stone because they believe that by activating it, they will rid themselves of our attentions.’

‘And the Balethu? Why do you seek it?’

‘To fulfil what our cults were trying to achieve on Umidia.’

‘Which was?’

‘Ah, you ask too much of us, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus. Perhaps our host will yield the answers under more of your…

ministrations.’ The prisoner’s eyeball rolls again to reveal his pupil and iris. I grip the hilt of the serrated knife and twist. His eye widens and he opens his mouth to scream but before he can emit any sound I clamp my vambrace between his jaws, shattering several of his teeth.

‘When I move my arm, the only sound you are going to make is to tell me why the Crimson Sabres massacred the Balethu. Do you understand?’

He nods frantically, blood and sweat streaking down his smooth pate. I slowly remove my forearm from his mouth and he spits the remnants of teeth to the floor.

‘A daemon. They were trying to summon a daemon.’

KRANON THE RELENTLESS, CHAOS LORD

You cannot win. The puppets of the Corpse-Emperor will murder you and halt your machinations. You are weak and even in death you will receive no reprieve. Our voices will haunt you beyond the grave. Our spirits will feast upon your souls.

Our victory is assured. We have the location of the Hellfire Stone and the final element we need to enact the ritual is within my grasp. Mock me all you like, because before the hour is through, the Crimson Slaughter will be free of your constant prattling.

Your arrogance will be your undoing, Sevastus. You couldn't even prevent the Dark Angel from activating the teleport beacon and any second now their reinforcements will arrive to wipe you from the face of the Imperium.

Their reinforcements come too late. We have already killed half of their number and they do not possess the means to combat Mortis Metalikus. And do not call me Sevastus. Sevastus doesn't exist any more. He hasn't since… since…

Umidia.

Was that what it was called? The insignificant world where we razed your villages and put an end to your barbarous ways?

It was the world of your rebirth, Kranon the Relentless. The rebirth of both you and your Chapter. Do not forget that.

No. That was no rebirth, that was a curse. Your voices taunting us during our waking hours, your dying faces haunting us whenever we close our eyes.

We did not curse you, we set you onto your true path, the eightfold path. The killing came easily to you – you proved that on Umidia – all we did was give you the chance to give that killing a higher purpose than following the divine will of a corpse entombed within a golden throne.

It was the only way to stop the voices, stop the faces in our nightmares. To kill and kill again. Demetra was next. The genocide of an entire world, the only purpose of which was to grant us a brief respite from your constant torture. After that, I forget the names. So many worlds bathed in blood, so many planets set ablaze just so the Crimson Slaughter would be free of your attention for no matter how brief a period.

We saw, no, experienced, the way you gave yourself over to the slaughter on Umidia, the way you revelled in it. You and your Chapter were always destined to tread this path, Kranon the Relentless, we just brought you to that junction a little sooner.

Lies! We were loyal servants of the Imperium, our record was exemplary. Our name was a byword for honour and integrity and you tricked us into becoming what we are.

We do not force you to kill, we merely provide the incentive for doing so.

It amounts to the same thing. Without the killing the constant whispering in our heads would drive us mad.

You think you are sane, Kranon the Relentless? You travelled halfway across the Imperium and led your Chapter into the Eye of Terror. You slaughtered Space Marines you once regarded as allies who were preventing you from getting in, and fought alongside those you once considered enemies to get back out again. Those are not the actions of somebody sane.

It meant that the lives we took were no longer those of innocents. The dwellers within the Eye were unworthy souls but still enough to keep your voices at bay.

But it changed you and your Chapter. The gifts of the gods were offered to you and you accepted them with open arms. You became stronger, more powerful, as did the Crimson Slaughter along with you.

It made the killing easier.

Easier how? Did the gifts enable you to become more effective in the art of murder, or did they assuage your guilt at exchanging those souls for a few moments' peace inside your own head?

Both. But our journey into the Eye gained us far more than that, as well you know. It gave us the opportunity of escape, to be rid of the Balethu curse forever.

How many times do we have to tell you that you made a false bargain? That the Hellfire Stone is not the route to your salvation? Why would Khor'en release you from his service when you claim so many skulls for his throne?

You lie. Another one of your tricks designed to stop us from vanquishing you and damning your souls to eternal torment.

No, Kranon the Relentless, it is the truth and you have always known it to be so. You know that activating the Hellfire Stone will open up a rift in the warp and allow a daemon to pass through into the material realm. You know this, yet still you have continued with your quest to find the stone. Why is that? Is it because you never truly believed that you would find it? That the journey would be a means to an end in itself with all the excuses it presented for slaughter? Or did you always believe you would find it and that is why you prosecuted the search with such zeal? Because by opening the rift and allowing my master's servant through it would grant you even more favour with him? Do you know why you remain silent, Kranon the Relentless? Why you do not issue a denial? Why you do not drive your blade into the spine of the Dark Angel at your feet and silence us?

Please, enlighten me.

It is because our master chose well when he chose you.

SERGEANT BARACHIEL

The sound of the klaxon still echoes in my ears as the metallic confines of the teleportarium chamber are instantaneously replaced by the lush green vegetation and blue sky of Bane's Landing. My sensorium array adjusts to my new surroundings and I breathe in the smell of battle as I visually assess the combat zone. The stench of burning flora, the chemical tang of superheated plasma and the iron-tinged scent of blood mingle with the odour of unwashed cultist, unholy oils and unguents and the barely perceptible redolence of adrenaline.

In front of me, seven red-armoured Traitor Astartes are firing their bolters on full-auto at the Dark Angels taking cover behind me on the opposite edge of the clearing. A handful of cultists provide them supporting fire with an array of crude auto-weapons. The remains of two black-armoured figures lie in the dirt, while the twisted form of a third lies at the feet of another crimson-clad Traitor. Sergeant Raphael sits slumped against a ruined tree stump, blood seeping through cracks in his smashed armour. He is alive but his breathing is shallow. With their sergeant incapacitated, Librarian Turmiel is directing Squad Raphael's fire but only eight weapons are directed at the enemy position and I know that two more battle-brothers are lost to us.

Master Balthasar is engaged with a thrashing Helbrute, the leviathan's arms flailing wildly as the robed Dark Angel fires and then rolls to avoid its retaliatory slash. One side of the Helbrute's face is melted and slipped, as if the beast is palsied, and it emits a near-constant bass whine of pain. Though the Company Master's shots all find their mark, such is the size and strength of the Chaos war engine that all he is doing is distracting and annoying the thing rather than inflicting any real damage.

‘Dardariel, Varhmiel, Narcariel: clear those traitors from cover,’ I bark across the general vox-channel. ‘Mendrion, with me. I think Master Balthasar could use some assistance.’

I coax my power sword to life with a flick of the activation stud and, with Mendrion in tow, charge the Helbrute. Still distracted by the Company Master’s stinging shots, the beast does not notice our attack until it is too late and both my blade and Mendrion’s chainfist bite into the thing’s leg, sparking as gouges are scored in its armour. It sways and lists, arms whipping madly as it howls once more but does not go down. Master Balthasar aims another plasma shot at its head and Mendrion and I do likewise with our storm bolters. The barrage finds its mark and instinctively the Helbrute raises its arm to cover its face.

With its vision obscured, Mendrion and I move position again and once more attempt to chop the thing down with our blades. Though my power sword finds more purchase as a result of the damage I’ve already caused, the result is the same and I narrowly avoid taking the full force of the Helbrute’s leg as it kicks out in anger.

On the edge of the clearing, the fire from the rest of my squad is relentless, forcing the heretics further back into the jungle. Dardariel’s assault cannon made short work of the cultists and the bolter fire aimed at the three Deathwing is sporadic and inaccurate. With the enemy fire now concentrated elsewhere, Squad Raphael and Turmiel emerge from cover and join the battle against the Helbrute.

Bolter shell after bolter shell impact harmlessly against the thing’s hide and the ricocheting rounds bounce crazily around the clearing, posing the same amount of threat as the enemy fire which has only just abated. On the fringes of the clearing, Brother Heskia waits impatiently for his plasma cannon to spool up, the heat of the weapon reaching critical levels through overuse.

For a third time, Mendrion and I attempt to bring the Helbrute down. With a vicious downward thrust, a fissure in the beast’s armour becomes an opening and the blade slides down into the mess of mechanics and organic matter. Black liquid issues forth from the wound, though I cannot tell whether it is blood, oil or something different entirely. As I attempt to remove the power sword to make a follow-up strike it becomes snagged and I am forced to abandon my weapon as the beast kicks back, narrowly avoiding making contact with my head.

Mendrion is not so fortunate. His chainfist becomes trapped between the plates of armour where calf meets thigh and in his struggle to free it, he does not notice the Helbrute's left arm swinging around. It grips Mendrion in its vast fist and lifts him up into the air as if the tonnage of Terminator armour he is wearing is nothing more than aspirant's robes. The Helbrute stares at him like a child looking at a new toy, oblivious to the intensified fire aimed in its direction now that my battle-brothers realise the danger their Deathwing comrade is in. For several seconds, Mendrion hangs there suspended while the Chaos beast examines him before a look that could only be interpreted as boredom crosses its features and it tosses the Terminator several metres in the air.

'No!' I scream across the general vox-channel, in anticipation of what is to come next.

As Mendrion falls back towards the ground, the Helbrute bends its fist at the wrist, fully exposing the three wicked spikes at the end of its vambrace, and thrusts its arm out, impaling him. Gravity continues to have its effect and as the Helbrute's arm swings upwards, Mendrion continues his descent and both Terminator suit and the Space Marine inside are sliced in twain. There is a screech of metal on metal followed by two wet thuds as the shorn warrior hits the ground.

Dardariel, Varhmiel and Narcariel simultaneously issue curses and oaths over the vox, though their constant stream of fire aimed at the retreating traitors does not abate. Though they had their backs to the Helbrute at the time of their battle-brother's death, every grisly detail was relayed to them by the shared pict feed in my armour's sensorium array.

'Barachiel, have your squad break off pursuit and engage the Helbrute instead.' Master Balthasar's tone has a hint of desperation about it. 'Heskia? How long before that plasma cannon is able to fire again?'

'At least a minute,' comes his reply across the vox.

'We could all be dead in a minute if we don't stop this thing.'

+Master Balthasar?+ Turmiel's voice invades my head. From the way the other Dark Angels' heads incline it is apparent they can hear him too.

The Librarian had been tending to Raphael on the edge of the clearing since the enemy fire ceased but the blue-armoured figure now strides out into the centre of the clearing to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Company Master.

+Please, allow me.+

MORTIS METALIKUS

You are nothing more than a beast of war to them, they unleash you to do battle then put you back in your cage until they need to call upon you again to shed more blood. But you were a mighty hero once, remember? You do remember, don't you, Mortis Metalikus?

I looked down at the two pieces of the ivory warrior and it reminded me so much of the little pieces of the game I used to play with *him*, before he made me like this, when my body was my own and I didn't hear the voices.

The voices. Thousands of them at war in my skull. They taunted me, robbed me of my sanity and amplified my pain.

I didn't want to listen to them, never wanted to listen to them, just as I didn't want to kill and kill over and over again just to make them stop for the briefest of moments. But the voices wouldn't stop, every waking moment they spoke to me and when rest did come, despite being conditioned not to dream, their dying faces pursued me beyond the realm of sleep.

Still, I refused, and the voices grew louder. My brother, my true brother, argued with me, tried to reason with me. He told me that I had to kill if I wanted the voices to stop, but again I refused and they only grew louder.

You should have heeded him, you pathetic wretch. He was always the strong one, always the leader. If only you'd listened to him while you had the chance then you wouldn't be like this now.

A planet burned.

He was already set upon his path but I would have no part of it. When I defied him, he made me his prisoner, the bonds of true brotherhood

being all that prevented him from slaying me, and while the Crimson Sabres metamorphosed into the Crimson Slaughter, I rotted in a cell and slowly went mad.

Sometimes, at night, he would come to me in my prison and urge me to reconsider. The voices would add support to his words but I resisted. He told me that my mind was no longer my own, that I was no longer responsible for my actions and should give myself over to the slaughter. My brother, this true brother, could not break me, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard the voices tried.

The Eye that does not blink.

Many years passed, years in which I did not feel a sun against my skin or alien ground beneath my feet. I existed in a dark void, the voices my only companions. From time to time, he still came to see me in my cell but the visits were more infrequent and every time I saw him, he resembled less and less the warrior I once called brother. The voices were so many and so loud by then that their words no longer made any sense to me, just a dirge that served to block out his words of coaxing.

The warrior in blue, what is he doing?

I lost all sense of time, all sense of space, all sense of identity. In those scant moments when the voices were cogent they whispered to me of the horrors wrought by my brothers – and my true brother. They showed me glimpses of things as I slept: streets running with rivers of blood; children watching in terror as their parents were slaughtered, knowing that they were next for the butcher's knife; millions of souls crying out in horror as their world was set ablaze; the new prison that was being constructed for me.

Did we show you these things, Mortis Metalikus, or were you already seeing them through your own eyes by this point?

Then they came for me.

My brothers had changed so much during my incarceration; though my madness had claimed enough of my memory that I could not remember their names, I knew that much to be true. Where once were the smooth curves of their Space Marine power armour, there were now spikes and ridges, horns protruding from helmets. Those that eschewed helmets had strange marks upon their skin and when I saw them the voices grew ever more excited. Even the ship on board which I had been kept prisoner had been altered since the last time I had seen outside my tiny cell.

They mocked me, my brothers, just as the voices had mocked me all these years and I fought them. Not because they mocked me, or because they had turned their backs on me all these years, locked me away so they did not have to face a reminder of their former glory. Nor was it the madness that drove me to do battle with them, or a desire to use their souls to bargain with the voices for silence. It was survival that led me to bite and kick and scratch them that day, as they carried me through the now organic corridors. The voices had told me what awaited me and an eternity spent dwelling in a dank, dark cell was infinitely preferable to what my brother, my true brother, had in store for me.

I wish I had no memory of what happened next, that my insanity would obscure any kind of recollection of the atrocity he committed, but the voices constantly remind me and I am forced to relive the horror every second of my existence.

We do not have to. That moment was the greatest of your life and you bask in it constantly knowing that it was the making of you.

The chamber was filled with all manner of instruments and devices and black-robed acolytes muttered prayers in dark tongues while burning vile-smelling incense over them. My brothers placed me on an obsidian plinth–

Your brothers didn't have to, you went willingly once you knew the glorious new form you were about to take.

–and strapped me down with thick chains that burned my flesh. I fought them until the very last, biting and gouging them even as my bonds were tightened and all hope of escape was lost.

Liar! You thanked every one of them for giving you the opportunity to serve, embraced them each in gratitude for allowing you to become more than what you were.

My brother, my true brother, came to me then, having stood to one side while his Crimson Slaughter laid me down like an animal to sacrifice.

'Brother, I have found a way to rid us of our curse, to be free of the voices once and for all. But I need your help. Will you help me? Will you help us?' He swept his arm around theatrically to indicate the other former Crimson Sabres in the chamber.

My years of captivity had deprived me of the ability of speech but I did not need words to issue my response. With every fibre of my being, I tapped into memories long since forgotten, activated my Betcher's gland

and spat a gobbet of acid in his face. My brother, my true brother, did not flinch but the voices told me he still bears the scar to this day.

‘So be it.’

He reached down and grabbed me by the throat, pulling against my jaw until I felt bones separate and flesh tear. In one clean action, he ripped my head and spine clear of my body and turned me so that I was looking down at my bloody remains. I tried to scream but no sound came out, my mouth no longer connected to anything capable of generating noise.

‘Just as we were reborn and shaped anew, so shall you be,’ he said as he handed my silently screaming head to a black-robed priest.

I remained conscious for the rest of the procedure.

I know not if it was days, weeks or months those dark acolytes toiled in that chamber of horrors, but they took what little was left of me and interred me in the Helbrute. Pain wracked me constantly as control of my new body’s life support and weapon systems were hardwired into my brain and my spine fused to the daemonic workings that controlled my motor functions. One of the last systems to be brought online was my vocal array and the pent-up scream of agony I unleashed, once I was finally able, left half a dozen acolytes dying a slow painful death as they bled out through ruptured skulls.

The warrior in blue, what is he doing?

When the acolytes were through, my brother, my true brother, came to see me again, just as he had done so many times in my previous prison. He looked upon my new body and smiled.

‘Oh, the things we will achieve,’ he said as he circled me, inspecting me up and down. ‘The Crimson Slaughter will no longer be slaves to the dead souls we massacred so long ago.’

You will! You will!

‘No longer will we have to kill to silence their voices, to cease the waking nightmares that haunt us.’

You will! You will!

‘Together, brother, you and I will rid us of our curse and make us masters of our own destiny once again.’

Poor deluded fool.

‘But now that you are ready to take your place alongside your brethren, we shall have to give you a name.’

My name. The voices had riven my mind to such a degree that I could no longer remember my own name.

‘Your old one will not do, as in the currency the Crimson Slaughter now trade, a true name is the most valuable coin of all. Instead you shall be known as Mortis Metalikus and in time the Imperium will tremble at the utterance of those words.’ My brother, my true brother, motioned to one of the acolytes. ‘But for now, you must rest. I will come for you again when the Crimson Slaughter have need.’

I wanted to strike him where he stood, to eliminate him in revenge for the thing he had turned me into, but before I had the chance the acolyte deactivated the Helbrute’s mechanics and as my brother, my true brother, strode out of the chamber I was left only with the voices to provide any distraction from the constant pain.

The warrior in blue, what is he doing?

BROTHER TURMIEL, DARK ANGELS LIBRARIAN

In 0.1 seconds' time one of the Crimson Slaughter Chosen who has fled into the forest will turn and fire a retaliatory shot back towards the clearing, aiming for me. Zero point two seconds later I will lean slightly to the right to avoid the bolter shell but I am not quite quick enough and it will catch the rim of my blue pauldron. The vibration will run through my shoulder reminding me that although I am psychically gifted I am still fallible.

Another 0.5 seconds will pass before the constituent parts of poor Mendrion's corpse stop twitching but it is another 13.2 seconds before the ripples in the pool of blood he created when the Helbrute tore him in two subside. During that time, many things will happen.

One point seven seconds after the bolter shell ricochets off my shoulder pad it will detonate three hundred and twelve metres away in the trunk of an ancient tree. At the same time, the Helbrute realises that my battle-brothers have stopped firing at it and that I am approaching. Psychic flashes will flicker across my consciousness, the heightened mental state of a Space Marine in battle making their thoughts as loud to me as a shot from Brother Heskia's plasma cannon is to them.

What in the name of the Lion is he doing? Does he have a death wish?

That thing killed Master Zadakiel. He doesn't stand a chance.

Takes a warptouched to kill a warptouched…

I will suppress their thoughts as I have done countless times before. All Space Marines are conditioned to make them transhuman, still human yet something more, but a Space Marine Librarian is twice removed from the trillions of human souls that inhabit the Imperium.

Even among our battle-brothers we are still regarded at best with suspicion, at worst with contempt – as our very minds and bodies are a conduit for the warp, the same source of arcane power tapped into by the vile servants of the Ruinous Powers. Ten thousand years ago, shortly before the turning of half our Legion, psykers were outlawed among the ranks of the Legiones Astartes as a result of those same doubts and concerns that persist even now like a racial or genetic memory.

Zero point four seconds after my mind becomes quiet the Helbrute raises its multi-melta once more and takes aim at me. I do not need to draw upon my psychic gifts to know what is imminent as the sound of its weapon powering up is the only clue I need. The shot will never come, however, as 0.5 seconds after the weapon powers up, it lowers it and allows it to spool down harmlessly having realised 0.3 seconds earlier that I have erected a psychic shield around us both. The rage that up until then has been so evident in its eyes and features will dissolve to be replaced by a look that can only be described as relief. It will wail plaintively – the last audible sound the beast will ever make – though none outside the crackling blue warp energy dome will hear it.

The Helbrute's state of confusion persists for 1.1 seconds longer, by which point I have been able to penetrate its flimsy psychic defences and enter the thing's mind. The ease with which I am able to drop the shields implanted in his psyche during the years of conditioning he underwent to become a Space Marine gives credence to somebody or something having already dismantled his psychic protection many times before.

With the barriers negotiated it will take me a further 0.6 seconds to locate him within the riot of constant noise and colour that his mind has become, as if thousands of souls are vying for control, and 0.2 seconds more to drown out all other voices leaving the Helbrute as the sole occupant of his head. I hesitate for the next 0.2 seconds deciding upon the optimum form for my psychic avatar to take when appearing before him. If I get this wrong then I may enrage the beast more and not have time to get out of his mind before he raises the multi-melta and kills me. After briefly considering appearing before him as myself, I will choose to adopt the form of the Chaos Lord who has so recently fled from the battlefield.

Despite the psychic shield, thoughts from my battle-brothers will begin to bleed through 0.1 seconds later when they discover Sergeant Arion is missing from the field of battle. Even though all Dark Angels are

habituated to suppress their emotions, the loss of one of their own still elicits a strong response that can be felt by one such as myself. Another 0.1 seconds will elapse, and my mouth will fill with the taste of iron as blood vessels burst in my nose, before I raise the intensity of my shield and return my full attention to the Helbrute.

With all distractions removed, it takes only another 0.1 seconds to make my way through his psychic landscape to the only object that still remains there: a large rectangular metal box. The rendering will be crude, like the drawings found on the walls of caves by the early remembrancers who visited Caliban before its fall, but I will find a door along one wall and be able to turn the handle to open it. Like the Helbrute's mind, it will no longer be locked.

'Brother?' the occupant of the cell I have just opened will say 1.4 seconds after his eyes have adjusted to the light flooding in through the open door. 'Is that you? Have you returned?'

It will take me another 0.6 seconds to respond as I fully take in the cell and the prisoner within. Because the cell has been recreated from the fractured memories of the Helbrute, it is the smell of stale perspiration that is most prominent, starved as he must have been of light for so long during his captivity. The cell will be entirely bereft of fittings and furniture, smooth metal adamantium walls, floor and ceiling being the entirety of its construction. The captive himself will seem incongruous in these surroundings, clad as he will be in a full suit of power armour, completely red save for the left pauldron which will be black with a crimson sword icon emblazoned upon it. He will wear no helmet and his calm features will seem entirely at odds with the disorder I found upon prising open his thoughts.

'I have returned, brother.'

I will add no more than that and allow him to respond while I probe deeper into his mind. If I say too much or the wrong thing then my avatar will be revealed as unreal and my work will be for naught.

'I knew you would come again to see me.' His manifestation within the cell will relax, and with it his mind. All of his knowledge and memories will be laid bare to me and with them will come understanding, realisation and even pity. Zero point four seconds later he will speak again. 'The voices are no longer here. Did you do that? Did you finally find a way to make them go away after all these years of trying?'

I will filter through centuries of mental detritus, memories fractured by the torment he has endured since his internment within the Helbrute, and his incarceration prior even to that. I will see visions of glorious battle, the foes of mankind being driven back in the Emperor's name and His name being venerated by the Crimson Sabres, and they will mingle with images of nonsensical barbarism, of entire worlds put to the torch and civilisations extinguished. I will piece together these fragile pieces and rebuild them into a facsimile of the psyche that should be there rather than the one that is. I will locate the source of his confusion, his pain, his horror and for the briefest of instants I will feel empathy with this beast and thank the Lion that it was not the Dark Angels who had heeded the call that day to muster at Umidia, that it was not our proud brotherhood that was laid low by so base a trick of the arch-enemy.

Zero point four seconds after he has spoken, I will issue my reply.

'I did, brother. I have made the voices go away.' He will smile at this and raise a hand over his mouth to stifle a sob, old emotions from his pre-Space Marine days surfacing once more thanks to my invasion. 'But it isn't permanent.'

He will stare at me in response to this revelation, like a hungry animal who has just had a scrap of meat taken away from him.

'As soon as I leave this cell the voices will return,' I will say. He will look away from me and clasp his hand to his face once more, and then look back. He will look as if he is trying to say something in response but words fail him. The sorrow he will feel will render him as mute as his physical form. I will wait another 0.3 seconds until the strength of his emotions threatens to eject me from his mind, and feel blood running from my nostril in the physical realm, before speaking again.

'But I can make the voices go away forever. And the pain. Is that what you want? To be free of the voices that constantly haunt you and the pain that constantly wracks you? Is that what you want, Sevarion Kranon?'

Less than 0.1 seconds will pass before he nods his head and a tear streaks down his cheek, clearing a channel through the conglomerated grime of incarceration.

'So be it,' I will say as I drop the psychic shield.

BROTHER HESKIA

The fully charged plasma cannon thrums in my hands, my shoulders locked to prevent the weapon vibrating. I blink and in the split second it takes me to close and reopen my eyes, the shimmering blue haze that had enveloped Brother Turmiel and the Helbrute disappears. I have positioned myself squarely behind the brute in anticipation of such a thing occurring and now, standing less than two metres from my target, I depress the activation stud on the cannon and unleash molten fury.

The white-hot plasma superheats the air, burning off trace chemical elements unique to the atmosphere of this world and filling the air with a scent not unlike decomposing vegetation. The aroma is quickly replaced however as the shot finds its mark and the metallic hide of the Helbrute turns to slag.

I maintain my firing position and keep my legs fixed apart, heels dug into the wet earth beneath my feet, as I continue to jet plasma. The beast does not scream, does not make any sound at all, as the plasma corrodes his armour and continues to burn through the organics and mechanics within. Neither does it thrash or raise its weapons, nor even turn to face its killer. This is not just an acceptance of its fate – it welcomes death.

The gauges on my helmet display are all registering numbers well in excess of danger levels but I keep my gauntlet over the activation stud just that little bit longer to make sure the job is done properly. When I finally do ease off, an eerie silence fills the clearing, disturbed only by the ever more distant sound of the enemy retreating. The beast stands motionless, the gaping hole in its torso almost comical, framing as it does the blue-armoured figure of Turmiel standing the other side of it. It

sways unsteadily until, as if both gravity and life fail simultaneously, the Helbrute topples onto its side.

+Excellent work, Brother Heskia,+ Turmiel's voice says in my head.

+My thanks to you, Librarian,+ I reply without words. +Together we have avenged the death of Master Zadakiel and ensured that this… thing will never threaten the worlds or citizens of the Imperium ever again.+

He nods and I am suddenly struck by the realisation of just how powerful a being Brother Turmiel is. Having seemingly advance knowledge of where and when bolter shells are fired is one thing but to wield the power to subdue and lay low a foe as massive and deadly as a Helbrute is a different matter entirely. Thank the Lion that he blessed us with finding a psyker as powerful as Turmiel before the enemy did. He nods once more beneath his hood, giving me the distinct feeling that he is still in my head listening to my thoughts.

Master Balthasar's voice breaks over the general vox-channel. 'Squad Raphael, report. Any sign of Arion?'

A disappointing stream of negative replies follow but my hearts lift when I hear Sergeant Raphael's voice among them.

'Form on me. Sergeant Barachiel, you and your squad will take point,' the Company Master continues. 'Squad Raphael, take formation behind the Terminators. Turmiel, with me and see if you can find any trace of Arion's psychic spoor.'

+There are still eleven souls in the group we are about to give chase to. Though several of them are merely cultists, at least seven have psychic wards in place suggesting they are Space Marines, though I cannot tell whether Sergeant Arion is one of them.+

'Sergeant Raphael, you will remain here and prepare the dead for progenoid extraction,' Master Balthasar says.

The vox crackles as if a response is about to be issued but then the link closes once more without anything being said. Sergeant Raphael turns and assesses us all approvingly and makes the sign of the aquila across his chest before commencing to strip our dead of their armour. Though the sergeant is a proud warrior with decades of exemplary service to the Chapter, he realises that in his current state he would be a liability in the battle ahead and accepts his task with dignity and honour.

Following the Deathwing out of the clearing, each member of Squad Raphael returns our sergeant's salute before entering the undergrowth once more to retrieve our stricken brother.

KRANON THE RELENTLESS

Your brother lies dead because you abandoned him and left him at the mercy of the enemy. Already the maggots feast upon his organics and his soul is carried off to face eternal torment. You will be next, Sevastus Kranon. You have taken one of the Dark Angels' own and they will not rest until they have retrieved him. They are going to kill you, Sevastus, and then your soul will belong to us just like poor, deluded Sevarion's.

Make the most of the brief time you have left to mock me, Balethu. Once we reach the Hellfire Stone and enact the ritual I will be rid of your continual prattling and, as the Crimson Slaughter once rid the universe of your physical form, we will banish your immaterial presence too.

And don't call me Sevastus.

Still you continue with that line, Sevastus? You may have been able to delude your Crimson Slaughter that you're activating the Hellfire Stone to banish us but do you really have to delude yourself too? You're doing this to further your own ends and increase your power and favour among the Four. Don't you think the rest of the Crimson Slaughter know this? Don't you think we tell them every single minute of every single day? If the Dark Angels don't stop you then they will. They may have followed you loyally enough up until now but do you really think that when it comes down to it they'll let you go through with this?

Is that doubt I detect there?

Doubt? We don't understand.

You said 'If the Dark Angels don't stop' me. That's the first time you've conceded that the Dark Angels might fail to stop me since I

embarked upon my quest to find the Hellfire Stone. I know what's going on here.

Please, enlighten us.

You know I am going to succeed and it frightens you. It frightens you even more than when the entire Chapter of the Crimson Sabres marched into your towns and villages and slaughtered you. Even more than when your world was set ablaze and those fortunate few who had survived our genocide choked on the fumes from your world's funeral pyre. It frightens you and that's why you're trying to plant the seeds of doubt in my mind and the minds of the Crimson Slaughter, but your lies will not germinate. We can sense your fear, all of us, just as we sensed your fear all of those years ago back on Umidia. We sense your fear and recognise your desperation.

You laugh? Why do you laugh?

Oh, Sevastus, how did one so naïve rise to become the master of an entire Space Marine Chapter?

Don't. Call. Me. Sevastus.

Fear? You think that when you gunned down our unarmed tribesmen and hacked our women and children to pieces that we felt fear?

Yes. Again you laugh. Why do you laugh?

That was not fear, you fool. Our blood flowed for him, our skulls now belonged to him and we gave both willingly out of devotion. You may have prevented the ritual we had spent centuries working towards but in killing us you allowed us to serve Khor'en in another way. We were given the chance to corrupt an entire Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes and we welcomed it with open arms. That was not fear you could sense, it was gratitude. Every death cry as you cut us down venerated his name, every scream of pain as one of us bled out was a prayer of devotion. Fear? It is said that a Space Marine knows no fear but I thought you would at least be able to recognise it in others, Sevastus.

Make the most of these final few minutes of haunting me because when the ritual is complete, then you will know fear.

As will you, Sevastus, as will you…

INTERROGATOR-CHAPLAIN SERAPHICUS

‘What is its name, this daemon they were attempting to summon?’

The prisoner gurgles and spits blood from his mouth. It splashes to the ground, flecking the legs of my armour.

‘In the tongue of the Balethu he is called Haur’esh,’ he murmurs. The lights in the interrogation chamber flicker briefly and the temperature drops perceptibly. The two Chapter serfs stationed at the door vomit and one of them flees from the room screaming. I backhand the traitor with my gauntlet and once more grip his jaw in my hand.

‘Its true name. What is its true name?’ Without turning away from him, I motion to the other Chapter serf to leave.

‘I don’t know it. None of us knew it.’

‘What about the Balethu? Did they know it?’

‘We were too busy slaughtering them to ask,’ the prisoner laughs, blood bubbling from his lips. I backhand him again and his cheekbone fractures. I let go of his jaw with my other hand and his head hangs limply as he flits between coherence and unconsciousness. If Turmiel were here then I’d have no compunction about letting the psyker loose in the prisoner’s mind to extract the information we need, but the Librarian is needed on the world down below and I do not have the time to recall him.

‘Let’s try another line of questioning, then.’ I stride over to the table where my interrogation instruments are laid out and select a handful of fleshbarbs and torsion bolts. ‘How did the Balethu plan to summon this daemon? What vile ritual did they have to enact to conjure the fiend from the warp?’

‘I’ve already told you enough.’

I can barely hear his voice; my ministrations have weakened him to the point where he is barely clinging to life. Slowly I move across the chamber towards him.

‘I will ask you again. How is it summoned?’

‘I’ve done all my master asked. I led you here, into his trap, and now I can die knowing that there’s nothing you can do to stop us.’

He is barely conscious now, life ebbing from him at an alarming rate. I thrust a fleshbarb into his chest in an attempt to shock him back into some semblance of coherency but all he can muster is a pathetic grunt as the metal penetrates beneath his skin. I’m losing him and time is running out.

‘Tell me what the summoning ritual entails and I will grant you a swift death. Do not tell me and I will keep you artificially alive and in constant pain for months.’

A bluff, he will not live beyond the next few minutes, but in his diminished state I gamble that he’ll believe me. It is a bet I lose.

‘Too… late. We’ve already…’ The sentence is never finished as the traitor finally expires. I throw the remaining fleshbarbs to the ground in frustration and then, glancing back at the table where my interrogation implements and crozius arcanum sit, I am struck by an idea.

I pick up the crozius and, black pearls gleaming in the artificial light of the chamber, charge towards the chained-up corpse. I swing back the power weapon before thrusting it forwards into the dead traitor’s chest. The fused bones of his ribcage shatter and while the sound of the impact still echoes around the chamber I have dropped the crozius to the floor and drawn my combat knife. Embedding it at the point where I expect the ribcage to terminate, I use both hands to push the blade up through the mass of ruined flesh and bone.

Withdrawing it once it reaches the base of his throat, I place both hands into the rent in his upper torso and move them in opposite directions, peeling open his chest to expose the cavity beneath. Just as I have seen so many times before as the result of battlefield injuries, it folds back to reveal twin hearts – neither of them beating – nestled between a multi-lung and other organs vital to the creation and survival of a Space Marine. I retrieve my weapon of office from where I unceremoniously dumped it on the floor and activate it, ramping it up to full power.

Then I thrust it up into the gaping hole I have just made in my prisoner.

His eye opens instantly and the scream he emits is distorted by the convulsions wracking his body. I lower the intensity of the weapon's power, leaving just enough energy coursing through him to keep his hearts beating and his brain activity functioning.

'For the last time, how is the ritual carried out?'

'Please… please… just let me… die.' His remaining teeth are gritted as he says this.

'Answer my question and I'll make it so.'

'Sacrifice… a blood sacrifice.'

'That's not a proper answer. What kind of blood sacrifice?'

'That's… why the Balethu lured us to their home world… why they had us lure you here too… sacrifice… has to be a Space Marine. Now please… let me die…'

I'm already on my way out of the chamber as he utters that last sentence and as I stride down the corridors of the *Sword of Caliban* to vox a warning to the Dark Angels on the planet below, the gentle rumble of engine noise abates as the prisoner begins to scream once more.

COMPANY MASTER BALTHASAR

‘Acknowledged, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus.’

Though not entirely unexpected, the information just relayed to me adds a new urgency to our mission. I open the general vox-channel.

‘We are to proceed on the assumption that Arion is still alive and being held captive by the Crimson Slaughter. Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus has finished interrogating the prisoner and has determined that the Hellfire Stone is a Khornate altar upon which a blood sacrifice is to be made in an attempt to draw forth a daemon of the warp.’ I do not need to add that Arion is to be that sacrifice, as the inference is clear.

Upon hearing this, the remnants of Squad Raphael and Squad Barachiel increase their pace, not only eager to rescue their brother but also keen to prevent an otherworldly abomination from being called forth from the aether. The terrain begins to harden the deeper into the forest we venture and the undergrowth thickens to such a degree that at times we are forced to run in single file behind the four hulking Terminators. Conversely, the trail of our prey is easier to follow as bark and branches have been stripped from trees where the path has narrowed to less than the width of an armoured Space Marine, and lengthy gashes are carved in the soft earth, presumably left when they’ve had to drag Arion.

The light breaking through the canopy above intensifies and as the path through the trees widens to allow two of us to walk abreast it is evident that we are approaching another clearing.

‘Contact,’ Sergeant Barachiel’s voice booms over the vox a split second before the report of bolter fire issues forth from fifty metres or so along the path.

A dozen bolter shells impact against the sergeant and Varhmiel, standing next to him in formation, but they all detonate harmlessly against their suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour. Adapting to the situation on the fly, both lead Terminators crouch down to allow Dardariel and Narcariel clear sight of the enemy. Storm bolters and autocannon hammer the enemy position, forcing the crimson shapes up ahead to duck back behind the cover of the massive trees.

'Up, up! Keep moving,' I yell over the vox-link.

The Terminators heed my order but face an even sterner barrage as more of the Crimson Slaughter add their firepower to that of their brethren. Bolter shells find their mark and servos are destroyed in both Varhmiel and Narcariel's suits slowing their progress even more. Dardariel's assault cannon glows red hot as it sprays the enemy with shot and his tenacity is rewarded when one of the Crimson Slaughter number goes down after taking a succession of rounds to the head.

The enemy response is instant, though, and a concentration of fire aimed at the heavily armed Terminator finds a weak point in his armour and shreds flesh and bone at his knee. He falls prone but without hesitation both Angelus and Oriphiel fill the void he has left in the formation and lend their bolters to the effort.

Another figure appears in the opening to the clearing ahead to replace the fallen Traitor Astartes, though it is no transhuman who takes his place. Instead, a cultist strides boldly up to the enemy lines, flamer at the ready waiting to jet promethium over the blue starter flame and turn this section of forest into an inferno.

'The cultist, take down the cultist!' My voice is barely audible in my helmet over the din of battle.

The three Terminators left standing pool their fire in the direction of the newcomer but, though several shots find their mark including one straight through the crude rebreather apparatus he is wearing, as his body pitches forwards his final act is to depress the promethium activator.

The forest in front of me glows bright orange as gouts of flame make contact with dry bark and ignite the trees either side of the narrow path. Thick black smoke billows forth as the sap below starts to burn, laying down a screen through which the Crimson Slaughter and their lackeys can fire with impunity. Firing blind, we return it in kind but with no way of picking out targets, none of our shots hit home.

Then, just as I’m about to give the order to charge, the situation evolves into something much worse.

The rapidly spreading flames not only move towards us but also in the other direction, back towards the clearing and the enemy position. As they creep ever closer to the Crimson Slaughter, the corpse of the flamer-wielding cultist becomes bathed in fire and the promethium tank on his back heats to critical levels. The resulting explosion kills not only two of the Crimson Slaughter Chosen and the three remaining cultists but also fells two cyclopean trees across our path, creating a burning barricade preventing us from reaching the Chaos Lord, the Hellfire Stone and Arion.

With all other courses of action closed to us, I speak directly into Turmiel’s mind and issue the order of last resort.

SERGEANT ARION

I awake to the sound of an explosion and the smell of smoke. I blink my eyes open and my vision resolves to reveal a blanket of blue interrupted only by daubs of white, and I realise that I am staring at the sky. I attempt to lift myself into a sitting position but my motion is inhibited and all I succeed in doing is raising my head a few centimetres from where it is resting. I look down at my body to find that I am bound to some kind of stone with thick iron chains.

The Hellfire Stone? Is this what the Crimson Slaughter have been seeking all this time?

I turn my head to the side and take in my surroundings. I am in a clearing, not unlike the one I was in when I activated the teleport homer, and on the far side a handful of red-armoured figures are firing their bolters into a burning forest. Two loud cracks ring out that I initially mistake for shotgun fire but they are soon followed by a pair of thunderous crashes, signalling that a couple of trees have been felled. The fire from the Crimson Slaughter ceases.

I struggle against my bonds, but they are pulled so tight against my armour that the only part of my body with any mobility is my head. Frustratingly, my chainsword sits in its scabbard by my side but I have no way of reaching it.

With combat over, the Crimson Slaughter now turn their attention to me. Only five of them remain now and the one in the blue cloak and the horned helm, presumably their leader, draws his power sword and starts to advance upon me.

‘Well, well. We only needed a Space Marine to complete our ritual but a member of the esteemed Dark Angels Second Company, a sergeant at

that, is an unexpected bonus,' he says in a voice that does not belong to him. 'But tell me, Ravenwing, I thought you were supposed to be quick? Not quick enough to outrun your fate, were you?' The four Crimson Slaughter beside him laugh by way of response.

Is this what Seraphicus meant all those years ago? Is this the fate that the Lion and the Emperor have had destined for me all along?

'Do not worry, Ravenwing. You won't have to live with your shame for much longer,' he says, eliciting more laughter from the Chosen flanking him on either side. 'In moments you will be dead and our master will grant us our just reward.'

I hear the sound of metal grating on metal and, impossibly, I look down to see the chains that so tightly bind me gradually slipping away. It is followed by a tiny *clunk* as the metallic catch of my scabbard undoes, seemingly of its own accord.

+The Lion give you strength to do what you have to do, brother.+

No. This was the Emperor and the Lion's plan for me. This is why I had been spared. Not to enable the Hellfire Stone's activation but to *prevent* it.

As if sensing what is happening the Chaos Lord picks up his pace and raises the sword above his head. 'No! I have come too far. You will not rob me of this!' he screams, launching himself at me.

I roll sideways from the sacrificial stone, reaching down for my chainsword as soon as my arms are clear of their shackles. The Chaos Lord's power sword strikes the position where, until scant milliseconds before, I had been lying helpless and embeds itself in the Hellfire Stone in a shower of sparks. My thumb hits the activation stud of the chainsword and as I slide clear of the stone, I twist my body and bring my weapon up. Gravity does the rest as the blade bites easily though the breastplate of my armour and pierces the first of my dual hearts. I land with the sword beneath me, adjusting the angle of the blade to allow the force of impact to drive it up through my secondary heart. My blood flows freely but in throwing myself clear, I ensure that none of it bleeds onto the stone and completes the blasphemous ritual.

The Chaos Lord's primal howl of frustration still rings out as my world goes black again for the final time.

COMPANY MASTER BALTHASAR

The five Crimson Slaughter traitors disappear in a bright flash of light as I enter the clearing, leaving their after-image burned on my retina for several seconds afterwards before my occulobe compensates, preventing permanent eye damage. Squads Raphael and Barachiel emerge from the jungle behind me, along with Turmiel who makes straight for the Hellfire Stone and the body of Arion.

'*Sword of Caliban*. The enemy have just teleported away from our position. Commence scanning – they must have a craft somewhere nearby,' I say, opening up the vox-link to the orbiting strike cruiser. All around me, Terminators and other Space Marines are securing the area, searching the undergrowth fringing the clearing for booby traps or sign of ambush.

'We've been monitoring constantly ever since you made planetfall, my lord,' the voice of the ship's captain says in my ear. 'We haven't detected any sign of other… Wait. Just now. A massive energy flare from the far side of one of the planet's moons. They must have held orbit there to mask their presence from our auspexes.'

'Do you have a firing solution?'

'Negative, my lord. The moon is blocking our line of sight and they'll have made warp translation by the time we can manoeuvre the *Sword of Caliban* into position. I have a fix on your position and can teleport you aboard the enemy ship if you require but that window of opportunity will only remain open for the next seven seconds before they are out of range.'

I look around the clearing at my battle-brothers. At Barachiel and his three Terminators, their armour pitted and dented from enemy bolter

shells, Dardariel barely able to stand, blood drying on the greaves of his armour. At Tennin, his breastplate ruined by the three claw-marks running across it. At Angelus, Joash, Kerael, Orion and Simiel, their armour in almost as poor a state as the Terminators', green giving way to bare metal by way of battle decoration. At Heskia, his plasma cannon now useless through overexertion, helmet and pauldrons spattered with the molten remains of the Helbrute. At Turmiel, his tattered cloak fluttering in the breeze as he recites a benediction over the corpse of the Ravenwing sergeant. At myself, battered and bloody but, like my battle-brothers around me, alive to fight another day.

'Lord?' the captain queries in my ear.

'Negative.' I open up the general vox-channel so that the Dark Angels planetside can hear my next order too. 'Stand down. I repeat, stand down. We are in no state to teleport blindly aboard an enemy ship. Vengeance will be ours, but not this day.'

On the other side of the clearing, Barachiel turns away from his search of the undergrowth and nods his assent.

The Thunderhawk idles in the centre of the clearing, the backwash from its engines swaying the saplings and young trees on the borders of the forest. Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus moves among the bodies of our dead, commending their souls to the Lion and the Emperor, and, in lieu of an Apothecary, removing their progenoids to ensure the succession of our Chapter. Though not trained in the healing arts, the Chaplain does a serviceable job and at least some of the gene-seed may remain intact until it can be borne back to the Rock.

Two servitors carefully lift the Hellfire Stone from where myself, Sergeant Raphael and Sergeant Barachiel have removed it from its resting place, before loading it into the back of the Thunderhawk.

The survivors of the two squads, both Fifth Company and Deathwing alike, look on as Seraphicus performs his mournful but noble task. After each slain Dark Angel's genetic legacy is bequeathed to the Chapter, their corpse is reverently carried aboard the awaiting craft by their battle-brothers, the act of sending the dead on their final journey too venerated to be left to mere servitors or Chapter serfs.

Turmiel stands apart from the group, watching impassively from beneath the ragged hood of his cloak. Though Arion's sacrifice is understood by those who survived him, the Space Marines under my

command are not stupid and realise that the Librarian must have had a role to play in the Ravenwing shedding his bonds. My fear is that the already aloof psyker may have ostracised himself even more from those he has to fight alongside. I will speak more of this with Seraphicus once we are back on board the *Sword of Caliban*.

Our mission and duties to the dead complete, the Dark Angels retrieve their weapons and prepare to board the Thunderhawk but find me standing halfway along the boarding ramp, barring their entry. I raise a hand to both halt and silence them.

'Dark Angels. Our mission of the past few months draws to a close and Master Zadakiel is avenged, his killer dead at the hands of Brothers Heskia and Turmiel.' I pause and allow the two Space Marines their moment of adulation, noting that only the two sergeants congratulate the Librarian directly. 'But as this mission ends, so another begins. Seven more of our brothers lie dead thanks to the Crimson Slaughter and though even in death they will still serve the Chapter through their genetic legacy, seven more names will be added to the *Grimoire of Remembrance* on the Rock and seven more souls cry out for vengeance.' Every set of eyes is focused on me, every jawline set hard in defiance.

'Let not their deaths be in vain. Let the memory of their deeds and heroism be your spur. Let the sorrow of their passing drive you to even greater heights and grant you the strength to hunt down and slay those who would strike at the heart of our great and noble Chapter.

'Remember too your own heroism this day. That you thwarted the schemes of the arch-enemy and prevented a being of unspeakable horror being called forth from the immaterium, saving not only more of your brothers' blood being shed but also this world and those around it. Remember this and draw upon it the next time your brethren or the worlds of the Imperium are imperilled, when all seems lost and the situation calls for even the greatest sacrifice to be made.

'Remember all this as we go now back out among the stars, towards further glory, further honour and further death. Remember this as we go once more in search of vengeance!'

As my battle-brothers pass me on their way aboard the Thunderhawk, I look each of them square in the eye, reinforcing our bond of brotherhood and honour before taking my place alongside them and leading them once again into the unknown.

BROTHER TURMIEL

In 3.7 seconds I will follow my battle-brothers in boarding the Thunderhawk. Although there is plenty of room on the craft, Squad Raphael stow their kit on several of the empty seats and force me to sit apart from them. Nine minutes and 12.2 seconds later the Thunderhawk will rendezvous with the *Sword of Caliban*, and during that time Master Balthasar will be the only soul on board to either speak to me or acknowledge my presence.

Within one hour of being back on board the strike cruiser, Master Balthasar will contact the other elements of Fifth Company operating within the Draconis System and arrange to extract them from their theatres of battle. Within one Terran week Fifth Company will be back up to nearly full strength and we will head out of system to rendezvous with Fourth and Sixth Companies along with elements of the Scout Company.

It will take us a further week of warp travel to join up with the other companies as we will receive new orders en route and divert to an abandoned gas-mining moon. Only Master Balthasar, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus, Squad Barachiel and the veteran sergeants will make their way down to the moon and after three days of intense combat they will return minus two of the sergeants and one of the Terminators. The Chaplain will lock down fully half the decks of the *Sword of Caliban* with nobody save the Company Master and Deathwing allowed access. When we finally do meet up with our battle-brothers, Interrogator-Chaplain Seraphicus will commandeer the *Sword of Caliban* and, along with the three remaining Deathwing, will return to the Rock. Fifth Company will transfer to the battle-barge *Angel of Retribution*,

which Fourth and Sixth Companies have been using as a mobile base of operations, and Company Masters Boaz and Tigrane will cede command of the mission to Master Balthasar due to his familiarity with the enemy rather than seniority or rank. Those brothers who fell during the Battle of Bane's Landing will be replaced as Scouts from Tenth Company swell the ranks of Fifth and embark upon their careers as fully-fledged Space Marines.

For the better part of a month we will chase the Crimson Slaughter to the very edges of the segmentum, slowly whittling down their numbers through a series of skirmishes that move from planet to planet, system to system. It will soon become obvious that the Crimson Slaughter are making their way to tau space and our mission parameters change so that instead of constantly pursuing the traitors we start to lie in wait for them, working out which worlds they will hit next in their attempts to procure supplies, materiel and recruits to their dark cause. Twice Master Balthasar will engage Kranon the Relentless in personal combat and twice those duels will end in stalemate, the craven heretic teleporting away just as he is about to be struck a killing blow.

The further we move into the Ultima Segmentum, the more we will encounter battle-brothers from other Chapters. The xenos threat is always great but as we move towards the end of the 41st Millennium the darker that threat becomes and in addition to those Chapters who maintain a constant vigil over the region, others will be drawn to the segmentum to do battle against the expansionist tau. Ultramarines, White Scars and Salamanders will fight pauldron to pauldron with Doom Eagles, Hammers of Dorn, Angels Encarmine and battle-brothers of less celebrated Chapters. Great will be the deeds of the Dark Angels as the invading aliens are beaten back and worlds reclaimed in the name of the Emperor.

But our quest for revenge will not be forgotten. Allying his forces with those of a Chaos Lord whose origins lie back in the dark days of the Horus Heresy, Kranon the Relentless will blaze a trail across the segmentum until eventually he will be cornered on a nameless moon deep within tau space. The Dark Angels too will find allies in the unlikely form of the Space Wolves Chapter, and while our Fenrisian cousins annihilate the traitor fleet in orbit to prevent Kranon and his forces escaping once again, Master Balthasar will wreak the vengeance we have so long sought against the Crimson Slaughter.

Engaging the Chaos Lord in personal combat for a third time, the Master of Fifth Company will return to the *Angel of Retribution* with Kranon the Relentless's head in an iron box.

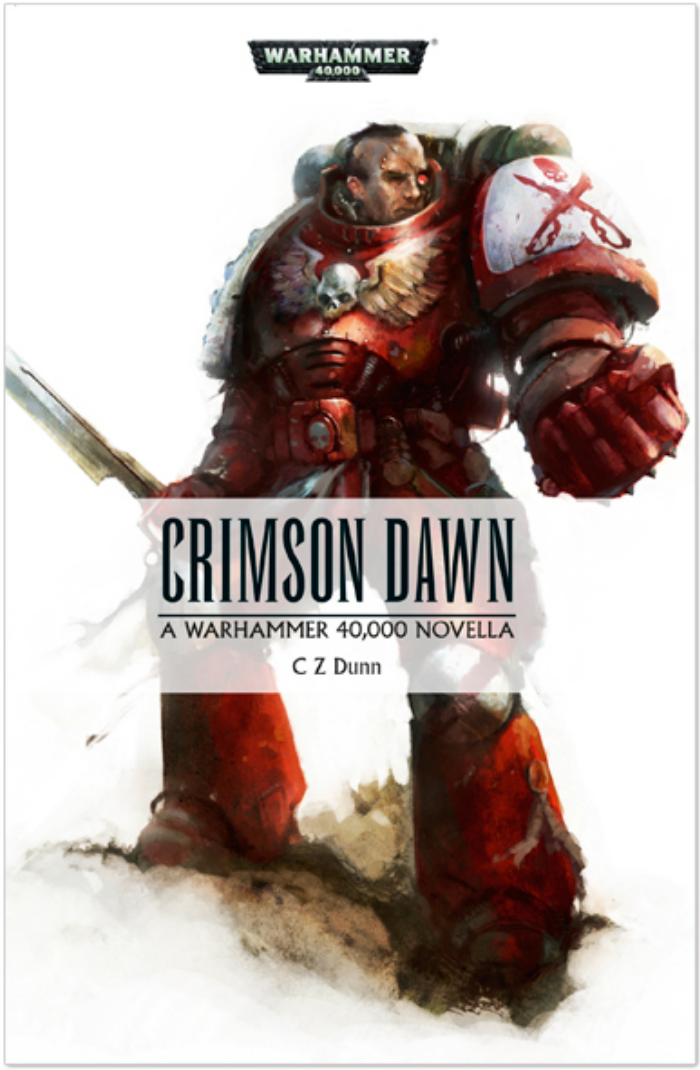
These things I know because the warp has granted me the foresight and the clarity to see them, but there are aspects of the future that it refuses to or cannot show me. Throughout our pursuit of the Crimson Slaughter I am there, fighting alongside the Company Masters and my battle-brothers, but the closer we get to our objective, the less I feature in my own future until I disappear from it altogether. Be it some trick of the Warp Powers or foreknowledge that I will meet my fate at some point during that period I know not.

Regardless, I go now to face the future head-on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Domiciled in the East Midlands, **C Z Dunn** is the author of the Apocalypse novel *Pandorax*, the Dark Angels novella ‘Dark Vengeance’ and the audio dramas *Trials of Azrael, The Ascension of Balthasar* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories. Having spent many years in the publishing industry, with a strong leaning towards genre fiction, he is an expert in e-publication, audio production and zombies.

Excommunicated, hated and hunted, the Crimson Slaughter turned from the Emperor's Light and have since carved a bloody trail through the Imperium.



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